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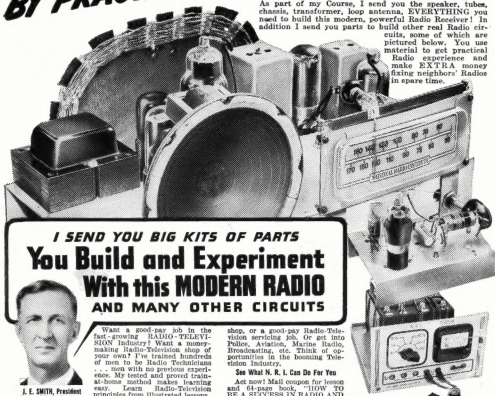
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by 'GENE CUNNINGHAM



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No. 5

T. T. SCOTT, President

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THE SIX-GUN SAGA OF MUSTANG JONES

By Thomas Thompson

TROUBLE WAS HIS HERITAGE.

Because of it he helped no man and he asked no favors. His grandfather Volney Jones, after whom he was named, fought his own private war for Texas independence for ten years after the battle of San Jacinto. His father, Austin Huston Jones, shot his first Indian at ten and his first Mexican at eleven.

Then something happened. Austin Huston married a settling-down woman when he was seventeen and he lived with her until she died. It must have cramped his soul but he had his own way of getting around things. When the California gold rush came along and Austin Huston couldn't go he just started prospecting right there on his own ranch in Texas. Folks said



*Mustang fired . . . and
knew he had missed!*



He could bust a brone with one hand
and a man's jaw with the other . . .
He could dig graves with his spurs
and fill 'em with his blazing Colts . . .
Yellow-belly Jones, they called him.

the Jones family always needed to be looking for something they couldn't find, and maybe that was right. At least, young Volney, now past twenty, was like that.

He was handsome in the same way a high bred bull is handsome—well-meated, blocky, all squares and angles. He slouched at six feet and stood six-two when he had a mind to. He had blue eyes, a whim-

sical smile and a soft voice. He was lazy by nature, but it bothered him to sit still too long. There was a great gnawing inside him and it was probably the same gnawing that had made Austin Huston prospect in his own back yard. Volney Jones was looking for something and he didn't know for sure what it was. He did know it wasn't Red Bevins who was com-

ing up the street there toward him. Red Bevins meant trouble, but Volney didn't turn out and let him go by.

Red had a tail holt on the town. He'd had it for some time and nobody did anything about it because they were afraid. It was as easy to take orders from Red Bevins as it was from anybody else and when a place got as civilized as this it stood to reason you were going to take orders. Red fattened his pockets in a number of ways but folks grinned and said, "Well, if Red didn't get it the taxes would." It was a sight easier to say that than it was to come out flatfooted and admit they were afraid of Red and his gang.

Volney Jones wasn't afraid. He just didn't care. He had tried to get along with Red and his gun partner Jock Elkins and his corpse-like business manager Becker DeLain. If Volney didn't like something Red ordered done, Volney just didn't do it but he was willing to let Red go ahead and fleece the rest of the folks. It was up to every man to tromp his own snakes. Volney figured, and that's the way he lived it. Just like those twenty five prime steers of Red's—Volney had driven them off and sold them because that was the thing he had wanted to do. He could see now that Red wasn't going to take kindly to it.

It wasn't surprising, because Red Bevins wasn't like Volney. Red had to stick his nose in other people's affairs. He couldn't leave well enough alone. He kept pushing Volney around. Volney told him once, "I'm a trouble man, Red. Don't get me started." But Red kept pushing. He walked up to Volney there on the street now and said, "Volney, I'm missing twenty-five head of my best steers."

"I ain't surprised," Volney said, grinning that slow smile. "I drove 'em off myself and sold 'em and I got the money here in my pocket. I thank you for raising them up to selling size for me."

Red Bevins had a way of sputtering some when he was mad. He was four inches shorter than man size and broad as the bed of a wagon. He was a fancy man in everything he did, all the way from courting a woman to drawing a six-

shooter. He said now, "You got an hour to get out of town, Volney. If you ain't gone by then you'll be a long time here."

"Now Red," Volney reasoned, "you're looking at this thing from the wrong angle. You stole those calves from me when they still had milk on their whiskers. I didn't say nothing about it then because I was pressed for feed and cash. I'm still pressed for cash and them calves are two years old so I took 'em back. That's the way it is and don't go spoiling it by pushing me."

Red's neck looked swollen and purple and his eyes were mean and steady. He said, "One hour by the courthouse clock yonder, Volney." He turned around and headed back down the street and Volney glanced about him, wondering where Jock Elkins was staked out with his rifle. He didn't worry much about Becker DeLain. DeLain was a short-gun man who did his killing under the top of a poker table. Volney looked at the court house clock and he thought, *Why do they always keep pushing me this way?*

Actually, Volney Jones had already made up his mind to leave town. He had just today sold the little scatter of brush he called a ranch along with the twenty five RB steers which he felt were his to sell. He had blankets and flour and beans and bacon and coffee tied behind his saddle with a big iron skillet perched on top to weight it down. In his war sack was an old brass-bound spy glass his grandfather had willed to him and along with that was ammunition for his six-shooter and his Henry rifle. A new reata he had made himself from bull hide hung at the side of his saddle. An hour was plenty of time in which to get out of town, since he had already decided.

But now he got a sort of stubbornness inside him and he decided he'd stick around a little longer. He went down the street and turned in at Red Bevins's Hoof and Horn saloon. When he came through the door everything inside got quiet.

Becker DeLain was sitting over at the faro layout flipping the beads on the case back and forth with his finger. He kept turning cards out of the box but nobody was playing with him. He was a dark

man, tall and stringy, with a certain elegance about him. He wore his black hair long and it waved above his ears and turned up in small ringlets above the velvet collar of his coat. He never smoked and he never drank.

Down at the end of the bar burly Jock Elkins kicked a spittoon with his foot. The big brass spittoon rocked back and forth, bottom weighted by the sand that was in it. It kept going clump—clump—the sounds getting closer together all the time, until finally the spittoon was steady again. The two bartenders kept standing there. They looked like they were swallowing something they hadn't chewed. Volney said, "Afternoon, boys. I've got money in my pockets and I was leaving town soon so I figured I'd buy you all a drink."

The sharp corners went out of the air and men moved up toward the bar. All except Becker DeLain. He still sat there turning out cards. Jock Elkins kept blinking his eyes like maybe he didn't understand it. He looked disappointed.

Volney Jones had his drink and then he said, "Yep, I'm leaving town. As soon as I get damn good and ready."

One man choked on his drink and another started edging toward the door. The bartenders looked hopeful, like maybe there was a chance for a compromise. Volney wasn't going to let it lay. He said, "In case some of you didn't know, Red Bevins set a time limit on my stay and I don't like that."

He half turned so that he could keep an eye on Becker DeLain over there at the faro layout. He saw now how it was convenient that Becker didn't drink. Jock Elkins was making sounds deep in his bull throat. He said, "You better arrange your time like Red said, Volney."

"I can't make it work out that way," Volney Jones said. "Are you objecting?"

"You better arrange your time just like Red said," Jock Elkins said again.

Volney expelled his breath in something that sounded almost like a sigh. He said, "You boys just keep pushing me, don't you? I told you to leave me alone but you wouldn't do it. I don't know how to start this but if calling you a dirty, yellow bellied coward will do it I'm calling you

that. Without that gun of yours you wouldn't have guts enough to stand up to a half grown jackass rabbit."

Two more men left the saloon quick and it only left four besides Becker DeLain, Jock Elkins and the two bartenders. Volney knew those four. They drew top pay from Red Bevins and if the blood money on their heads was added together it would have made a tidy sum. He kept standing there sideways, looking at Jock and still keeping his eye on Becker DeLain. Jock Elkins looked around the room, saw how much backing he had, and he started to grin. Jock liked to make a big show and he did it now. He reached down and unbuckled his gunbelt. He had to fiddle a minute with the thong that was tied around his leg. He laid the holstered gun and the belt on the bar and he folded the belt neatly so that the buckle was on top. He stepped away from the bar, still grinning, and he said, "Now say that again, Jones."

"I don't chew my cud twice," Volney said. "You heard me."

JOCK ELKINS started walking slowly forward and Volney Jones went out to meet him. But he didn't go quiet all the way. He had taken maybe four steps when he turned suddenly and threw himself at the faro table. He scooped up a chair and banged it down on top of the table and the table split wide open. Then everybody could see the gun in Becker DeLain's hand.

Becker jumped to his feet to get away from the swinging chair and he was leaning back, off balance. Volney hit him once and he crashed against the wall and slid down and sat there and his head hung way over on his shoulder. Volney still had the chair in his hands. He turned his body and the entire weight of the chair caught Jock Elkins on the side of the head.

A bullet plowed a furrow in the floor at Volney's feet. The four gunmen were lined up against the back wall, taking their time, mighty sure of themselves. Volney hit the bar top with his hands and vaulted over. His spurs tangled with the bottles on the back bar and they fell with a clattering crash like ten pins set up in a bowling alley. One of the bartenders had picked

up a bung starter, but he never had a chance to use it. Volney's fist caught him square in the center of the face and the bartender took both his hands and tried to stop the blood.

The other bartender came charging up from behind. Volney ducked, reached back, locked his hands around the bartender's neck and then straightened. The bartender went sailing through the air and landed on his head in the broken clutter of bottles and whiskey.

The four guns at the back of the room cut loose and the big mirror was shattered with a spider web of cracks running out from neat little holes. One bullet plowed a furrow across the top of the polished mahogany bar. Volney was crouched down low behind the bar, keeping away from the lead and searching. It wasn't long until he found what he wanted. A double barreled sawed off shot gun. He broke it to make sure it was loaded, snapped it shut, took a quick breath and stood up. He laid the ten gauge gun across the top of the bar, felt two bullets wing by his ears, then pulled both triggers at once.

The gun bucked and nearly knocked him off his feet and the powder charge set up a smoke cloud that blinded him. He heard a moaning and wailing there at the back of the room and one man kept saying, "*Mama mia!*" He made it sound like a prayer.

Volney came out from behind the bar. Big Jock Elkins was just struggling to his feet. He stood there weaving from side to side and Volney hit him on the point of the chin. Before Jock could fall Volney grabbed him by the collar and held him up. He started hitting him then, on the jaw, in the mouth, on the nose—anyplace he could hit. Finally his left arm got tired of holding Elkins up so he let him drop and he heard Jock's head hit the floor. It made a spongy sound.

Volney drew his six shooter and cocked it. The bartender he had hit first was getting up, still smearing the blood across his face with the palm of his hand. Volney said to the bartender, "Hand me a bottle first, then go find Red Bevins. You tell him I said he's got exactly five minutes to get out of this town and stay out. Five

minutes, no more. You tell him I'll wait right here."

The bartender got a bottle but his hands were shaking so badly he couldn't get the cork out. Volney took the bottle out of his hands, pulled the cork with his teeth and took a long drink. He said, "Hurry up, boy. He's got five minutes from when I first told you. Time's getting short."

While he was waiting Becker DeLain came to. Volney looked at the gambler and he said, "Goodbye, DeLain."

DeLain looked around the saloon. He saw the four men against the back wall. Two of them were still alive but two of them weren't. There was a lot of blood. He saw Jock Elkins huddled there on the floor and it didn't look like Jock was going to get up for a long time. Becker DeLain said, "Goodbye, Volney. We'll meet again some day, I promise you that."

"I'll be glad to see you," Volney Jones said.

Five minutes went by; then ten minutes and then fifteen minutes. Still Volney Jones was alone in the saloon. He had one more drink and walked outside. There was a big crowd waiting. The mayor was there, his face white and his lips trembling. Alongside him was the man who wanted to be mayor.

The man who wanted to be mayor said, "You've started the clean-up, Volney. It's the thing this town's been needing. We'll have our first honest election tomorrow and things will be different. I'm asking you now to be our first marshal."

Volney Jones grinned that slow smile of his. "No," he said, "I think not. I don't like your town and I don't like you. That affair in there was personal. I'm packed and ready to go. If anybody wants a drink before I go I'll buy it. I've got quite a bit of money in my pockets."

II

VOLNEY JONES HEADED WEST and north. He didn't know where he was going and he didn't much care. It was just good to be going someplace, beholden to no man, least of all to himself. He thought a lot about Red Bevins and Jock Elkins and Becker DeLain and when

he thought of them it wasn't with any hatred. If they wanted to follow him that was all right too. They had just pushed him around once too often and that's all there was too it. If he had cleaned up the town that was incidental; he hadn't done it because he wanted to help anyone. A man could get married to one spot just as he could get married to a settling-down woman, and that wasn't good.

Not that he held anything against his mother. She had been a wonderful person and in a way she had made up for everything Volney's father had missed. Volney couldn't understand that quite, but he knew it was so. Still, his father must have died a shriveled up man—not in stature, but Volney figured his dad must have been shriveled up inside. It couldn't have been otherwise. His father was a man who wanted to do something—find something. He had shown that by prospecting there on his Texas ranch. People had said he was crazy but that didn't seem to make much difference to Austin Huston Jones. He was never a man to care much what people said and to all outward appearances he was about the happiest man Volney had ever known. But Volney had the idea that his father had never found what he was looking for—

Grandfather Volney Jones had been a searching man too, but he had found what he was looking for. He had searched for trouble mostly and he had found a lot of it. And still it hadn't been enough and he kept on looking until the day he got a bullet between his eyes. Volney didn't want a bullet between his eyes but he didn't want to be shriveled up inside, either. There was a lot of looking to be done and a lot of country in which to do it.

He crossed the high plains and came to the mountains and they were startling things for he had never seen mountains like these before. They stood straight up out of aspen thickets and dark spiked conifers were thick on their slopes. The winds that came through the canyons had ice in their teeth and the streams were clear and cold.

Sometimes he found a spot he liked and he stayed awhile, then again he would travel straight for three days. It was after

he had crossed the mountains and circled south into the mesa country that he found a place to his liking.

HE HAD passed through towns on his way and here and there he stopped at an outlying ranch. He had replenished his stock of beans and bacon from time to time so he was well provisioned. He took down his gear and spread out his blankets and was fixing to build a fire when he looked down the long, winding canyon cut by the river and saw the herd of horses.

They were mustangs. Pot bellied, broom tailed beasts with Roman noses and long snagged hooves. They weren't worth much, maybe, but it gave Volney Jones an excuse for staying. They could be sold, he knew. Ten dollars a head—maybe more if he found a good one. It wasn't the idea of the money anyway. It was something for a man to do and he needed an excuse for what he did.

He was completely alone, and here without interference or without the snare of precedent he could catch horses and break them and sell them to the ranches that he knew must lie far down in the lower end of the canyon. He made camp and stretched out under the stars and smoked thoughtfully while the mesquite roots crackled in his fire and sweetened the air with their pleasant smoke. He was thoughtful and he thought maybe this was the thing he had been looking for.

By the end of a week he had built himself a stout corral in the form of a circle, building it of *palo duro* and juniper and lacing the rails to the posts with buckskin thongs cut from the green hide of a deer he had killed. He built himself a brush *jaca* to keep the sudden rain out of his face and without any formal arrangement he claimed the land for his own for as far as he could see.

In the long afternoons he practiced with his rope or slept, and in the early evenings he climbed up to the edge of the mesa and lay there with the brass bound telescope glued to his eyes while he watched herds far below.

They took on personalities, those horses, and he named them. Old Broken Toe,

Pot Belly Jasper, Breather—who had the heaves—Speckle Rump Bessie and Sporty. They knew he was there but he never bothered them and they kept venturing closer. He was getting lean and leather hard and he had let his beard grow and toward the end of the third week he threw his first loop.

He dabbed onto a bayo coyote with cactus in its belly and sin in its heart. He had taken a dally around his saddle horn and his little cow pony sat down and dragged his heels while the wild horse on the end of the reata tried to break its neck in a frenzy of gyrations. It wound up finally flat on its side, its blood red nostrils flaring, eyes rolling and its tongue lolling out the side of its mouth. "There now," said Volney Jones, "you're just being a danged fool and acting like a human. The tighter you pull the more that rope's going to choke."

He stepped out of his saddle and started going up the reata, hand over hand. He was half way there when the bayo coyote exploded again.

They fought for a good fifteen minutes, the man and the horse, Volney digging his heels into the ground, doing nothin more than trying to hold onto that rope and keep his feet while the mustang cut circles and didoes and sometimes came charging straight at the man.

But in time the man won out and he worked the horse around to where he could dally the rope around a snubbing post he had set deep in the ground. He gave himself a good rest and had a cigarette and as he looked at that misshapen line back standing there he said aloud, "Dog-gone me if I ain't in business. I'm a mustanger, that's what I am!"

The voice behind him said, "For sure, *senor*. A *mestenero*. A hard life but a satisfying one if a man is free, for there is always tomorrow."

VOLNEY turned quickly, his hand dropping toward his gun. When he saw the man who had spoken to him he didn't believe it. It was a priest—a roll of a man about five foot four in both directions. He wore nut brown robes and his hood was thrown back on his neck, exposing

his bald pate. He was a merry little fellow with a red cupid's bow mouth and apple cheeks and blue eyes that held a glitter. He wore sandals and he rode a sad mule and he seemed to be happy to find companionship.

Volney didn't know much about religion or churches and he held a sort of awe for anything connected with either. He stood up and removed his hat, then decided that wasn't the thing to do so he put it back on again. He said, "Hello brother—father. I'm right glad to have you on my spread. Won't you light and sit a spell?"

"Your hospitality is refreshing," said the priest. "I am Fray Olivera of the Capuchins. I have a mission with the Indians in the dry country beyond the mesas. Once a year I ride this way to see my bishop. But tell me of you. How come you to be here?" He got down off the mule with much grunting and puffing and walked over and sat down on Volney's blankets. He heaved a big sigh, folded his hands over his ample stomach and smiled up at the mustanger.

"Just lookin' and catchin', I guess," Volney said, no longer uneasy. "It looked like a big place nobody was using so I decided to stay around a spell."

"With trouble behind you?" the priest asked.

"Any man can have trouble," Volney said.

"You plan to stay?"

"When the roots start growing down from my legs I'll move along."

The priest nodded his head. "A man who does not know what he seeks."

He was thoughtful and he appraised Volney carefully, letting his eyes study every angle of the mustanger's face. He looked a long time into Volney's eyes until Volney had to turn away from his gaze. "Why?" the priest said.

Volney shrugged. "I like to look," he said.

"I guess every man does," the priest said. "Some find a god, some find a woman, some find gold and some find an early grave. I know a girl—a neighbor of yours not a day's ride from here. She is like that—" He looked at Volney again and smiled. "Never mind. Take care of

my mule and I'll rest awhile before the supper hour."

Volney looked at the mule and he looked at the priest. They were both a little moth eaten but they seemed to know where they were going and what they were doing. Volney said, "She's a tired-looking mule, ain't she?"

The priest sat up with an amazing suddenness. He said, "You may know mustangs, my friend, but I see you know little of mules. This mule is the descendant of a long line of regal beasts. Her ancestors marched through Mexico with Cortez and others pulled carriages for Queen Isabella. The mule, I would say," pursing his lips, "is worth five thousand pesos." He held up his hand. "But fifty thousand pesos couldn't buy her."

Volney looked at the mule again and scratched his head. "I never was much of a hand with mules," he admitted.

IT WAS pleasant to have company at the campfire that night even after he found out that the priest was not necessarily hampered by the truth if it got in the way of a tale. And the priest had his own way of doings things—

There was a certain way to lay a fire because a Piute chief over a hundred and fifty years old had shown the priest the way and this chief was the father of all fire layers. As for the matter of cooking—

The priest was sad about this. Knighted chefs of the king's court had taught him the secrets of *salsas* and wine cooking. He sighed. Such things were not for here. He watched Volney stirring the pot of beans into which the mustanger had dropped a healthy square of bacon rind. "Not fit for a pig," the priest said. "There—on the back of my saddle. There in a goat's bladder are beans cooked two days ago. Put them in the skillet and we fry them again with this cheese that was made in my little province in Spain. *Frijoles refritos con queso*—Ah, Mustang Jones, you have many things to learn. But that in itself is good. When a man becomes as wise as I am then life is dull at times."

"I reckon it would be," Volney said.

"But tell me about your mustangs," the priest said. "How many have you caught?

And have you caught The Big One? Ah no. Of course you have not." He was studying Volney closely. "But someday perhaps you will."

"The Big One?" Volney didn't like to appear ignorant.

"The Big One is the one you always search for," the priest said. "You haven't seen him?"

"Not yet," said Volney Jones. There was a merry twinkle in the priest's eyes and Volney could not tell whether or not it was a joke.

"No, you haven't seen him," the priest said. "But no matter. Someday you will. Perhaps I can drive him your way. He is a horse among horses."

Volney felt a queer stirring in the pit of his stomach. Perhaps his father had felt the same thing when he heard of gold in California. Volney said, "There is such a horse? You've seen him?"

The priest locked his fingers across his belly and shook with contented laughter. "Yes, I've seen him." There was a far away look on his round face. "He is a lean horse, but it is the leanness of muscle. His coat has the blackness of night and his mane is long and it has a curl. His tail sweeps the ground but never is knotted with a cockle burr. He can run like the wind and fight like a storm and he has killed a dozen men who have searched for him. He is the one who makes the mares restless in their corrals—"

"You call him The Big One?"

"That is The Big One," said the priest. "I can see now that you are a man who would never be satisfied until you have caught The Big One."

Volney looked deep into the coals of the campfire and he saw a huge black stallion walking on flame. "No," he said, "I guess you're right, father. I'd never be satisfied until I caught The Big One—"

They sat a long time, talking of men and horses, and Volney found himself saying words he had never said to another man. And long after the priest had gone to sleep and his snores were musical in the night Volney lay there awake, his hands behind his head, staring up at the stars. And the stars seemed to gallop across the sky with The Big One in the

lead. Volney Jones said to himself, "Maybe there's something to it. Maybe this is what I've been looking for."

Morning came with a blinding suddenness and the cold of the night wrestled a moment with the heat of the day. Then the sun came over the mesa and the red slipped down the escarpment and turned to liquid purple in the talus slopes at the bottom. Fray Olivera ate a hearty breakfast and shook hands with his new friend. He said, "Before I go, Mustang Jones, I must tell you this. I stop at the house of Lorelei Mathews tonight and she will ask me what I have seen. Because I am a truthful man I must tell her. Do not call this land your own for it is claimed by her and she does not like others here." The priest sighed and it was not a sad sigh. "But no matter. You will meet her in time, for she too is looking for The Big One. *Vaya con Dios*, my friend."

III

VOLNEY MISSED THE LITTLE priest after he was gone. He had been a pleasant man with a wealth of tales and it was good to sit back and listen to another man's voice. He hadn't taken the story of The Big One seriously and yet a few days later when he was out scouting the wild horse herd he felt his pulses quicken as he caught a fleeting glimpse of one larger and blacker than all the others. He put it down to imagination and let it go and before that day was out he added three more mustangs to his slowly filling herd.

He took a few days off then to saddle break the ones he had and there alone in the narrow canyon with no one to watch him he found a fierce joy in just living and pitting his tremendous strength against these wild beasts that had never before felt the touch of a man. It was almost as if in this primitive existence he had found the thing for which he was seeking, and yet it wasn't quite there. There was something else—

He caught himself dreaming at night about The Big One and sometimes over the breakfast fire he built fanciful flame pictures of what the phantom horse looked

like and of how he would trap him. He didn't believe it, of course. But the idea kept growing.

He found himself going further and further from camp now, no longer satisfied with the original herd which he had been following for so long. Old Broken Toe and Pot Belly Jasper, Breather, Speckle Rump Bessie and Sporty—they all looked rattier each time he saw them. Further down the canyon perhaps there would be another herd . . . He laughed at himself but he went to see.

It was late afternoon and he had climbed the wall of the canyon to get a better view. He stopped suddenly, startled by the smoke of a campfire. It was the first indication he had seen of other human beings in over a month. He must have come a long ways from camp.

There was no reason for him to be cautious and yet he was. He had been alone for a long time and a man gets to guarding his privacy. He reined his horse along the brink of the canyon until he came to a juniper thicket and there he dismounted and went on on foot. He had taken the brass bound spy glasses with him and now taking off his hat he stretched himself full length on the ground. He made a cushion with the hat and laid the spy glass across a rock so that he could train it on the camp there below him.

He studied the camp a long time, then got up and walked slowly back to where he had left his horse. There was a strange empty feeling in the pit of his stomach and his heart was beating slow and strong against his ribs.

There was no mistaking that shock of red hair on the one man, the huge bulk of the other, nor the graceful, almost mincing movements of the third. Red Bevins, Jock Elkins and Becker DeLain were down there. They could be there for only one purpose. They were after him—

It was too far to go back to camp so he made a dry camp there on the rim of the canyon and he didn't build a fire. He couldn't tell why he didn't. A few months ago he would have gone down to the camp boldly and asked them if they were looking for him. He would have taken his chances against the three of them

and he would have whipped them, he knew. Now he was sitting here alone in the star-heavy night without a fire, just as if he were afraid of them. It was as if he had discovered that trouble wasn't a part of him after all.

He didn't sleep well that night and he got up early the next morning and headed back toward camp without breakfast. He had taken a fancy to the place; it had grown to be home. Before he was ever in sight of the camp he knew something was wrong.

It was in the way his horse pricked his ears and in the way the wild mares there in the pole corral were acting. He rode carefully, every sense alert, his pulse quickening. He wasn't expecting trouble but there was something here. It was improbable that Red Bevins and his men were here before him for he was sure that they had not seen him spying on them and he was equally sure they had not located his camp.

The mustangs were acting as if another horse were around—a stallion perhaps. He dismounted quickly and tied his saddler. He took the reata from the saddle and screening himself with the mesquite that grew here he started working slowly around his camp. The mares in the corral whinnied. He edged closer and half parted the bushes and he saw the sleek, black skin, the beautiful muscle-trim legs. His heart started beating until he thought it would choke him. There was something to it. There was a Big One—

HE KEPT down wind and he kept moving closer and suddenly he saw the horse. It was a beautiful stallion, not as big as he had imagined. A sleek, black animal with the lines of a Morgan. It was not wild. There was a silver mounted saddle on its neck and in the saddle was a girl. The girl had a six-shooter trained steadily on Volney's forehead. She said, "If you're through sneaking around in the brush like a child come on out here where I can get a look at you."

He looked at the gun in the girl's hand and he looked at the girl. She was beautiful in a vivid way with startling black hair that hung in curls across her shoul-

ders. Her eyes were a smoky blue and her skin was like foam on a pool. She sat beautifully erect and he saw that she was tall but perfectly proportioned. There was no hardness about her even when she held the gun. There was only a complete sureness, just like the sureness he always felt, and yet in the depth of her eyes he saw an uncertainty, a searching. It was the same look he sometimes saw in his own eyes when he looked in a mirror. He said, "You're Lorelei Mathews?"

She said, "I am, and you've overstayed your welcome, so be moving."

"Father Olivera told me about you," he said.

Her expression didn't change. "Father Olivera is apt to say anything."

"He said you were lonely and hard headed."

"If I'm lonely it's by choice," she said. "I'm only hard headed where what I want is concerned. Start packing."

Volney was conscious of his beard and his ragged clothes. He tried to grin and he said, "This ain't no way for neighbors to get along."

She said, "I have no neighbors and what's more I don't want any. It was neighbors that killed my father. Do you start packing or do I pull this trigger?"

"Neither," Volney said. He felt the same old stir he had felt when Red Bevins had ordered him out of town. "And I warn you not to start pushing me around. I've been here for months and I've never seen one of your cows nor one of your riders. I'm not bothering you, so don't start bothering me. I could pull this gun of mine and shoot you out of the saddle before you could ever squeeze the trigger on yours, so don't try that, neither. If you want to act like a man I'll treat you like one."

Her eyes opened a little wider. She said, "If you think you can scare me—"

He said, "I don't. But don't think you can scare me either. I like it here and I'm staying."

For the first time she showed a hint of indecision. She said, "I have four *vaqueros* on my place. If you're not gone by tomorrow—"

Volney felt the old trouble stirring in-

side him. He said, "Look, Miss Lorelei. Don't send your men here because if you do I'll break their necks. I've been alone here and I've been peaceful and I find I sort of like it. If you start trouble with me there won't be no end to it."

Her eyes had fire in them now. "Why you ugly, bearded ape!"

His hand went to the full beard and he grinned. "If I'd a known I was gonna have company I'd a shaved," he said. He started walking toward her.

"You come a step closer to me and I'll kill you!"

"Lady," he said, "I've a mind to teach you some manners. I told you not to talk to me that way."

"I'll kill you!"

His hand shot out and gripped her wrist. He tightened his fingers and the gun fell to the ground. She didn't scream out but her face had gone dead white. It accented the color of her lips. She slapped him across the mouth with her free hand and then jerked a pointed boot from the tap-aderoed stirrups and kicked him in the stomach. He tugged her out of the saddle and shook her good. "Now listen to me," he told her. "I'm not here for trouble and neither are you. Let's keep it that way. Get on your horse and go back home and when you get sense enough to start acting like a lady I'll be right glad to have you drop by."

He released her suddenly, picked up the gun and handed it to her. She stood staring at him, saying nothing, then she took the gun and dropped it into its holster. She swung lightly into the saddle. She paused for a second then, both hands on the saddle horn, and she looked down. The fire was still in her eyes. She said, "No man has ever talked to me that way."

"You're wrong," he said. "One has."

"You think you can get away with it?"

"I think so," he said. Father Olivera told me a lot about you. He likes you."

She gave a little snort of indignation. "And I suppose Father Olivera told you about The Big One?"

Volney Jones grinned. "He did," he said. "Maybe that's why I want to stay. There's something to look for here." He paused and it seemed that the anger had gone

from her eyes. There was a hint of a smile at the corners of her mouth. On a sudden impulse new to him he said, "If I ever find The Big One, Miss Lorelei, I'll make you a present of him."

She was momentarily flustered; there was a touch of color in her cheeks. She tossed her head and said, "I'd accept nothing from you nor any man and the order still goes for you to get out. I'll be back in two days and if you are not gone I won't be responsible for what happens to you."

"So long, Miss Lorelei," he said. "Be careful riding down the canyon. Better take the rim trail. There's three men camped in the narrows and they ain't the kind to make fit playmates for lady. Even for a lady as tough as you think you are."

He grinned up at her.

She was completely angry and in anger she was more of a woman than when she was calm. She said, "I don't believe you. There was no one there when I rode through and if there is anyone there now it's because you brought them there. That's the trouble with all of you. Let in one and you all bring a dozen. You can't do things alone—" She sat there a minute biting her lips as if she couldn't think of anything else to say; then she spurred the black stallion and headed down the gorge. He stood there watching her go, sorry she was leaving.

HE caught himself fingering his beard and he decided he didn't like it. He went over to his fire pit and built up a blaze. He got water from the spring and filled the skillet and sat it over the fire. When the water was hot he worked up a lather by rubbing a cake of soap against his beard; then he got his razor and stared to shave. One side of his face was clean when the rope whistled out of nowhere and settled around his neck.

He was jerked off his feet and dragged halfway out to the corral. He heard Red Bevins's voice say, "Slack up a bit, Jock. I got my own ideas about this."

The rope slacked off and he could get his breath. He got to his feet and big Jock Elkins dove out of his saddle and crashed his fist against Volney's jaw. Volney rolled, dazed by the force of the blow, and he

IV

managed to drive his own fist against Jock's face. Red Bevins dove in fast and tripped him and as he fell Red's boot connected with the point of his chin. Volney flung out his hand and Red tromped against the knuckles. Volney could feel the bones break.

Jock and Red together held him down and Becker DeLain tied his hands behind his back, then forced his legs up and tied his hands to his ankles.

"Now turn him loose," Red Bevins said coolly.

Jock Elkins and Becker DeLain stood back and Red Bevins started kicking Volney in the face. "I've never given up looking for you, Volney," Bevins said. "You spoiled the best set-up I ever had in my life back there in Texas. A week ago we heard there was a half-witted must-anger hanging out up here in the canyon. When they told me it sounded like you." He ground his foot against the side of Volney's face. "It wasn't much out of our way so we thought we'd pay you a visit. Now I find you got more here than meets the eye." He was breathing heavily. "There's a mighty fine ranch a day's ride down the canyon and they tell me it's claimed by a woman. Shouldn't be hard to take it away from her—" He kicked him again and then went over and started mopping his face with a bandanna. He said, "You take over for awhile, Jock," and sat down to watch.

Volney couldn't remember all that went on but he knew they were finally working a rope through his bonds some way. From time to time Jock or Bevins would slug him. Becker DeLain stood back and ran cards through his hands or studied his well-kept fingernails. He knew finally that they had thrown a rope over a limb and they were jerking him off the ground.

He hung there that way by his wrists and his ankles, his head hanging down while blood ran from his mouth and his nose.

The three men mounted up and Red Bevins said, "I hope we get back this way sometime, Volney. If we don't, the damn buzzards will start pecking on you sure."

Volney Jones didn't hear them ride away.

THERE WAS NO WAY OF knowing how long he was there. Sometimes the dull, tugging pain drove all reason from his mind and again it probed him until he roared with the agony of it. He kept turning around and around at the end of the reata until the whole world seemed to be walking around his head. He felt the afternoon sun burning against his body and when he thought he could stand it no longer a sawing movement above him traveled down the reata and trembled through his body.

He fell then and landed against the ground and he knew that someone was cutting the thongs from his wrists and ankles. He tried to stagger to his feet and his legs went out from under him. His left hand was swollen twice its normal size and everything was spinning around crazily in his mind. It was a long time before he could focus his eyes and he realized then that it was the girl who had come back and cut him down.

She was standing above him, staring down at him, staring at the smooth shaven side of his face. She didn't speak to him at first, but she disappeared and he worried because he couldn't see her. And then she came back with the skillet full of cold water from the spring. She let him drink some directly from the pan and she threw the rest of it in his face.

The cold shock revived him to some extent and he managed to get to his knees and he crouched there, a huge beast of a man—all squares and angles with one half of his face covered by a flowing beard, the other half smooth-shaven. He raised his head and looked into the eyes of the girl.

She said, "I don't know what it is all about and it makes no difference to me. As soon as you can ride, get out of here. You'll just bring more trouble."

He said, "Did you come back and cut me down to tell me that?"

"I don't know why I did it," she said. "I should have left you."

"I've never done a favor for any man," he said, "and I've never asked one. But because you're here I'll tell you this. Those three men plan to take over your ranch.

I'm going to kill them, one by one. Not because of you nor because of anyone. If it makes it easier for me to let them take your ranch first I'll do it. I fight my own fights and no one else's."

She dropped the skillet to the ground and kicked it to one side with her foot. "I wouldn't ask your help if I needed it," she said, "and I'll offer you none."

"Then we understand each other," he said.

She mounted her horse and turned him, lingering a moment, looking back, seeing Volney there on his knees, unable to get to his feet. He struggled with himself, pushing his left hand against the ground, and the pain shot up his arm and he howled out with the intensity of it. It was the first time in his life he had ever found himself completely helpless.

The girl kept looking at him. She was biting her lip and there was something like worry in her eyes. She dismounted then and came back to him and she said, "Lie down, I'll see what I can do."

He stretched out on the ground with the sun beating against his eyelids. He said, "You came back again."

She said, "I'd do as much for a crippled dog. Be quiet."

He felt her ripping his trousers and then strong, supple hands kneaded the calves of his legs, bringing back the circulation. She worked with his forearms and when the blood ran into his mangled hand the pain was excruciating. She disappeared for awhile and when she came back she brought a crisp, white undergarment. She tore it in strips and bound his hand and now the blood was in his legs and he could get to his feet. There was a feeling inside him that he had never felt before and he couldn't find words to express himself. He said finally, "Thank you." And he realized that it was the first time in his life he had ever said that.

She said, "You're all right now. I'll be going."

He didn't want her to go, but he didn't want to tell her so. He said, "I'll make a pot of coffee."

She looked at him and there was nearly a smile in her eyes. She said, "I'll make it. It's a woman's job."

She made the coffee and while she was busy at the fire he watched her, seeing the deft, sure movements of her hands, the grace of her body. They drank together, the two of them, across the fire, and he said, "I'll ride with you a ways. We'd best take the rim trail."

She said, "I've not asked you for help."

He said, "And I didn't ask you. But I got it. If you hadn't cut me down, I'd a hung there a long time."

She said, "I suppose."

THEY rode together and they were silent and he was glad she was with him. Red Bevins had taken his gun and he had only his hands. One hand, in fact, for the left hand was broken and swollen, covered now with the white bandages she had made. She said firmly, "This doesn't mean you can stay."

"It doesn't matter," he said. "I have three men to kill. I want to kill them one at a time, in my own way. Becker DeLain first, and then when the other two have worried enough I'll kill Jock Elkins. I'll let Red Bevins go a long time and he won't be able to sleep and he'll never know when it's going to happen but finally, some day, I'll kill him."

She nodded her head, for she understood how it was with him. She said, "After that?"

He shrugged his massive shoulders. "I'll be going along, I suppose. There'll be something more to look for. More trouble, maybe."

She said, "How about The Big One?"

He was thoughtful a long time. "I don't know. Maybe it's only a dream."

"I've thought of that too," she said. He found it was easy to talk to her.

They had come to the edge of the mesa where he often stopped to spy on the horse herd. She reined up suddenly, a quick tenseness in her. She stood in her stirrups and leaned forward. "Look!"

He followed her pointing finger and there below them on the side of the canyon they saw the horse herd. The same mustangs he had seen so many times, but one stood apart. He was black and he looked bigger than the others. Volney's dark thoughts were gone and there was

no longer the press of trouble in the air. He dismounted quickly and took the brass-bound spy glass from his saddle bag. He pressed it to his eye and looked for a long time.

She took the glass from him and said, "Let me see."

They stood there together and her cheek was close against his smooth shaven cheek and he could feel the excitement that was in her. He said, "Is it The Big One?"

She said, "I can't tell. Here, look for yourself."

The black horse had moved behind rocks now. He swung the glass in widening arcs until he saw the glitter of sun on metal down in the narrows. He studied the place intently and he saw three men crouched there. They had rifles in their hands. It was Red and Jock Elkins and Becker DeLain. He couldn't understand what they were doing there until she called his attention to a dust cloud further down the valley. He moved the glass again and he saw men riding slowly. They rode as if they were searching for something. He handed the glass to her. "Do you know those men?"

She looked at them and she said, "They're my *vaqueros*. They're worried about me being gone so long and they've come to look for me." He knew then why Red Bevins was waiting at the narrows.

He didn't tell her at first. He had heard Red Bevins make his boast that he would take her ranch and at the time it had meant little to him. It was none of his affair then, it wasn't now. If those four *vaqueros* down there rode into the narrows the rifles would cut them down before they knew what had happened. He thought of Red Bevins and Jock Elkins and Becker DeLain and of how it would be with them. They would be gorged with their victory and they would be off guard. He could remain in his camp in the upper canyon and he could strike at night, one at a time, until the remaining man was insane with his worry . . .

He looked at the girl and her face was drawn. She said quietly, "I've asked for no help. You don't need to give me any."

He found himself making excuses.

"There's nothing I can do. There's no way to warn your men. I have no gun and, if I were to ride into the canyon now, they would shoot me out of the saddle before I could do any good."

She said, "I've given you no reason to help me. I'll try to warn them myself. I'll fight my own wars."

She spurred her horse. He reached out quickly with his right hand and snatched the check strap. "Wait," he said. "If we could force them out into the open—"

"How?"

"The horses," he said. "My mustangs back there in the corral. We could drive them down the canyon and into the narrows—"

She said, "But if we did then my men would kill those three. The thing you want most would be gone and you would have lost your horse herd."

He said, "We haven't much time."

THEY spurred their horses and rode back to the camp and when she came near on her black stallion the wild mares were impatient and pawed against the bars. He threw himself from the saddle and she came to help him with the buckskin thongs that bound the stout gate. The black stallion reared and whistled but she fought him down and got back into the saddle. He pushed the gate open with his shoulder and the wild herd thundered out toward freedom.

They rode toward the wall of the canyon, shouting and waving their hats, and the wild bunch turned and headed down the narrow gorge with the plunging abandon of free things. Volney and the girl closed in behind them, hazing them along until the herd was in a break-neck stam-pede.

The wild horse herd plunged into the narrows and over the rumble of the unshod hooves they could hear the startled curses of men. The girl rode her horse close to Volney and she handed him a six-shooter. He took it with his right hand and he tried to hold the reins with his left. It was clumsy so he put the leather in his teeth and now he had forgotten everything except the three men who were

there in the narrows directly in the path of the charging mustangs.

He saw one of the men—it was Becker DeLain—standing up looking wildly from side to side. DeLain started to run for new cover. The horses shied and the herd split and the close walls of the canyon closed them again and they thundered through and the tattered, torn thing that had been a man was there on the rock floor.

Volney clenched the reins in his teeth and shouted as best he could: "Stay back!" Then he rode on behind the herd and he saw Red Bevins and Jock Elkins.

Their rifles spit fire without sound and his horse went out from under him. A bullet hit him in the right arm and spun him around and he had to fight to keep from falling. He saw Jock Elkins—saw him plainly now. He fired and knew he had missed. He had half turned, looking for the girl—

He turned back and he knew the *vaqueros* had come into the narrows. There was a clatter of gun fire and Jock Elkins went down before Volney had a chance to shoot.

Another bullet hit him and knocked him flat. He fired wildly, knowing this was his last chance, and the hammer clicked against an empty chamber. He cocked the gun frantically, snapping the hammer again and again. Red Bevins stood up and came walking toward him.

He kneeled there on the ground, a brute of a man with half his face smooth shaven and half his face a matted beard. He threw the gun and it struck Bevins in the face. Red Bevins shook his head from side to side and came walking forward slowly. He had a cocked rifle in his hands.

All his life was there in front of Volney's eyes then. A life that had been spent alone—searching for something, he didn't know what. He had asked no help and he had given no help until today and he kept remembering the words of the little priest. "Some men find a god, some find a woman, some find gold and some find an early grave—" And this was what he had found. An early grave, just as his grandfather had found one.

He lurched to his feet and his useless

arms hung at his side. He bellowed with rage and he threw himself at the approaching rifleman. He saw the gun come up to meet him and there was the crack of a rifle but there was no sting of lead and he was not dead. He looked across the narrow canyon and Lorelei Mathews was there. She had a rifle in her hands and the smoke was curling thoughtfully from the end of the barrel. He dropped to his knees and he was completely helpless. The four *vaqueros* rode near and swung from their saddles. They went first to the girl and she spoke to them and then they came to Volney Jones . . .

THERE was light and there was darkness in degrees of startling intensity and then grey shadows and a campfire burned on the floor of the canyon. The girl was by him and the palm of her hand was cool against his cheek. She moved quickly when he looked at her. One of the *vaqueros* said, "A horseman is coming."

It was the little priest, Father Olivera. He wore his brown robe and his hood was back on his neck and he rode the sad mule. He looked at the dead men who were there and he said, "There is much sin in the world," but he did not seem sad about it.

They talked a long time by the fire, the priest, the mustanger and the girl. And they found it was easy to talk for the little priest was a comforting man. He listened to their story and he said, "You, Lorelei, have helped the man, and you, Volney, have helped the woman. It is as it should be so now I will marry you for it is a year before I am here again."

Volney Jones found his voice. A great fear was in his stomach and yet there was a warmth there too. He said, "I am not a settling-down man, father. You yourself said I would never be satisfied until I found The Big One."

"And you, Lorelei?"

"It is the same with me, father." Volney knew that was what she would say but he didn't like hearing her say it. He felt a sinking and he didn't understand the feeling. She said, "I guess I'll have to go on looking for your phantom Big One too."

"Then that is good," the priest said. "You have helped each other once and you can do it again. I say that four eyes are better than two when looking for The Big One and I am a very wise man."

Volney Jones looked at the girl and he saw her quick breathing and her eyes were glowing from the reflected fire. The warmth had grown in his stomach and now the fear was nearly gone. He kept remembering that he had not killed those men the way he had planned but it didn't seem to make much difference. Maybe he wasn't so much like his grandfather Volney Jones, for whom he had been named. He thought of his father, Austin Huston Jones, and it was no longer so strange that his father had married a settling-down woman and prospected for gold in his own yard. And suddenly he remembered the happiness of his father and he no longer thought of him as a man who had died

with a shriveling inside. He said, "I would have to shave the other side of my face." The girl looked at him and her eyes were bright and her lips were soft and red . . .

The fire flamed over a twisted mesquite knot and behind them the four *vaqueros* shrugged deep into their *serapes* and sang a soft sad song of their homeland. Volney Jones looked deep into the ash fringed coals of the fire and he said, very softly, "Do you see The Big One in there?"

"I see him," the girl said, and she moved closer and the warmth of her was near him.

They sat that way and he could not look at her and she could not look at him. But they both saw the little priest move out of the rim of firelight and they saw his round shoulders shaking silently with some inner merriment that they did not understand.

FIVE POLIO PRECAUTIONS ARE LISTED FOR PARENTS

Warning that the 1949 polio season is "just around the corner," the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis today issued a list of precautionary measures to be observed by those in charge of children during the epidemic danger period which usually runs from May through October, reaching its peak during the hot, mid-summer months. The five easy-to-follow health rules for children are:

1. Avoid crowds and places where close contact with other persons is likely.
2. Avoid over-fatigue caused by too active play or exercise, or irregular hours.
3. Avoid swimming in polluted water. Use only beaches or public pools declared safe by local health authorities.
4. Avoid sudden chilling. Remove wet shoes and clothing at once and keep extra blankets and heavier clothing handy for sudden weather changes.
5. Observe the golden rule of personal cleanliness. Keep food



tightly covered and safe from flies or other insects. Garbage should be tightly covered and, if other disposal facilities are lacking, it should be buried or burned.

The National Foundation also listed the following symptoms of infantile paralysis: headache, nausea or upset stomach, muscle soreness or stiffness, and unexplained fever. Should polio strike in your family, call a doctor immediately. Early diagnosis and prompt treatment by qualified medical personnel often prevent serious crippling, the National Foundation pointed out.

The organization emphasized that fear and anxiety should be held to a minimum. A calm, confident attitude is conducive to health and recovery. Parents, it said, should remember that of all those stricken, 50 per cent or more recover completely, while another 25 per cent are left with only slight after effects.

If polio is actually diagnosed, contact the chapter of the National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis serving your community. The chapter will pay that part of the cost of care and treatment which patient or family cannot meet.

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Matthew heard a scuffling sound above . . .

LONG GUN

By SAM CARSON

The gun-jackals laughed, closing a bushwhack trap around old Matthew Jett. He was always swearin' by his ancient rifle . . .

Now he could take it with him to Boot Hill!

MATTHEW JETT WAITED IN the shed, with its segment of a roof, the yellow kerosene lights of Boone's Lode, Nevada, reaching through the slow rain, taunting him with a message of warmth and comfort. He was a stranger to the silver country, a mountain man from Tennessee. Right now Matthew Jett was a hunted man, hunted by the killers

of his son. His eyes narrowed at a soft footfall.

He held a rifle, not tense nor particularly afraid. Not since he could remember, and Matthew was fifty, had there been more than a few weeks at a time when he could walk his native Cumberlands unarmed. Now it was the same. Twice his stalkers had been by the old shed below

the stamp mill. Twice he had heard Mel Walder's high-pitched voice, cursing his men for their failure to find their quarry. Now they were gone, and Matthew had the feeling that Walder was giving up the manhunt, for the present.

"Jett," a voice called softly. "It's Daniels."

The mountain man relaxed. Daniels owned the stamp mill, and he had warned Matthew earlier. In fact, if it hadn't been for the warning, there would have been one less Jett in this world. "I'm here," Matthew replied.

He heard Daniels slide the rickety door open. "They're back in the Silver Eagle, Jett. Walder's picked up two more of his crowd. They'll be back."

"Uh huh. Kind of figured they would."

"I've got a horse saddled. Head south for Mankin's ranch. Couple of hours ride. They'll get you to the railroad."

"Thankee," Matthew replied gently, "but I ain't going anywheres, yet."

"Jett," the other man said patiently, "it's like I said when you first reached Boone's Lode. The ore's running out, and we have just the ghost of a town. No marshal. No spirit. There's just a few tired old men left, and we can't stop that hellion crew from The Purgatory, whenever they take a notion to take over. The day you sent word to Mel Walder you're here to even things up for Clee Jett's murder you asked for a tombstone."

"You have helped me a lot," Matthew told him. "Warn't for you, I wouldn't have had a chanst to know the three I got to kill. I'm leaving," he added grimly, "for The Purgatory."

"Man alive! Ben Jeffries is one of the fastest men with a six-gun I ever saw, and he's Walder's partner. Three others I know of are wanted men, all killers protected by Walder. I tell you Jett they'll fill you full of lead while you're trying to aim that rifle."

"Uh huh. Don't aim to let 'em git that close, if I can help it. Thankee, Mister Daniels. Reckon I'll git going."

MATTHEW eased his well-muscled body into the rain and darkness. Daniels had helped all he possibly could.

The issue was in Matthew Jett's hands from now on.

If he hadn't inherited the natural reticence of the mountain people, Matthew might have been more convincing. For days he had explored the trail over the mountain into The Purgatory. Daniels didn't know about that. As for that, the stamp mill owner wouldn't ever guess at Matthew Jett's real problem.

He had to pit his rifle against men with six-guns. For thirty years now, the Tennessean had borne his burden of shame, unconfessed. But his memory of that windswept day in the little Texas town was still undimmed.

Matthew had been a cocky young man, maybe a lot like Clee Jett, his murdered son. In an argument with a cattle man, Matthew had dared the Texan to draw. Matthew's left wrist was still twisted, the reason being a six-gun slug which had shattered the bone and rendered Matthew's rifle harmless.

In the years which had followed, Matthew had learned how to survive, and win. Furthermore, he had won with his rifle, but he knew also that the issue had never been settled. Six-gun artists were scarce in the mountains. There you had distance in your favor, distance and cover afforded by dense forests, blue haze and rocky crags. There, rifle matched rifle, and the winner either was a better marksman, or a superior woodcraftsman. Daniels didn't need to worry on that score.

The matter of exacting payment for Clee's murder had to be written off. Matthew knew all the details he needed. The callousness of it kept the fires of vengeance burning. It's hard for a man to forget a thing like that, impossible for a father.

Clee had shared a claim with a prospector he had met in Denver. They had traded for a low grade ore mine in The Purgatory. It wasn't until they had arrived that they had learned that Walder asserted ownership. The partner had been more discreet, abandoning the claim. Clee had defied Walder. It was an outright steal. By working several small mines, Walder was moving ore by pack train. He needed Clee's mine. Jett's son had made

a mistake. He had tried to stand off Walder's crowd in the open.

Mel Walder and Ben Jeffries! And the name of the third man was Lowe. Matthew had memorized the features and characteristics of each. Tonight they would be going back, and a moon was just coming up. The rain already was thinning, as Matthew had guessed it would. Knees bending, as the upgrade began, Matthew Jett climbed to his rendezvous.

He knew he might not return alive. Matthew was a fatalist, but he had as much will to survive now as he ever possessed. This was no errand of revenge, aired back home before his departure. None save Matthew's oldest son knew. The story of his journey could wait his return. There was a double purpose, and even Cully Jett, back home, didn't know about the Texas episode.

The moon was high, the clouds departed before Matthew reached the upland plateau, sheer beneath rimrock where the trail flattened out for a furlong. Facing the trail was a pinnacle, cleft at the tip, and Matthew worked his way to the split. Protected from the rear by the inaccessible, upright pile, he had a refuge worth the keeping. And presently five men rode up the trail.

Matthew waited until he knew they were Walder and his men. Without remorse he shot at the foremost. Carefully he carried out his plan, shooting not men but their horses. Three of the animals went down, and Matthew didn't relish the sight. He had no quarrel with animals, but this was beyond the call of humane reasoning. One man was beneath his horse, and the others had scattered, shooting, yelling, till Walder bellowed a command. He was on foot. Matthew swung his rifle. His sights touched the middle of the one person Matthew wanted to get. A sort of exultation filled him as he began to squeeze the trigger.

SUDDENLY a bit of loose rock to the left of Matthew's face exploded. Stung in face and eyes, the man on the pinnacle jerked his body instinctively and his shot went wild. Matthew knew a chance shot had smashed the stone, but

he was blinded for the moment, and that was bad. The lucky shot had balanced the surprise of Jett's attack. "Maybe it's a judgment for shooting hosses," he thought.

No longer was there confusion on the moonlit trail. The man Matthew had first hit, rested as he had fallen. Nearby he could see the second downed man, still pinned by his mount. But Walder had vanished.

Two horses, unharmed by the ambush, were visible, but their saddles were empty. That meant three men under cover, and now it was Matthew Jett's turn to wait. For a time he could be patient, hopeful that one of the three would rush the pinnacle. Such a move he welcomed.

There was silence on the trail, the loose horses huddled beside the boulder, the wind leaping the rimrock above in mad eagerness to clear the jagged obstructions. The sound was not alien to Matthew, and somehow it gave him confidence. He could wait, for in the minds of those men who had hunted him in Boone's Lode, and failed to find him, there was building up anger. And now Matthew spoke.

"You was looking for me?" he inquired. "I'm here to 'blige you, Walder."

A six-gun spoke twice, flashing from above the rump of a prostrate horse. Matthew's eyes smarted, but his vision was clear as he aimed, very carefully. The .300 calibre rifle spat, and when the flash of its speaking was gone, the head which had showed above the horse had vanished. Nor did it reappear.

Matthew didn't speak again. He felt certain this wasn't Mel Walder, nor did he believe it was Jeffries. Men who were good enough to run a wild country like The Purgatory didn't blaze away at a voice. Not when the owner of that voice had shelter. But Matthew had eliminated a six-gun handler, and now the preliminaries were over.

Walder and Jeffries were the sort to stick it out, and they'd be calling. One reason Matthew was so sure of Jeffries' survival, was that he was probably riding beside Walder. And Walder had been in the rear, that Matthew knew.

They'd never get him with pistols, even

if they waited for daybreak. This setting he had chosen for a showdown, the ambush his medium of provoking that showdown. He eased a hand to the bandanna in hip pocket, brushed dust from his eyes. Maybe Walder would never know the margin upon which his life had depended. But that one shot had altered Matthew Jett's scheme.

"Mel," a voice called, and it came from the cliff north of the pinnacle. "Mel, don't answer. Just listen."

Jeffries! Matthew didn't even make an attempt to locate the speaker. Wherever Jeffries was, he wouldn't be visible. But he might be located where he could catch movement, maybe through the cleft in the rim on Matthew's flank. "Mel, I'm above him. If he tries to get out of his ambush, I've got him."

The listener on the pinnacle thought that over. The cliff was too distant for a six-gun to carry.

Jeffries had a rifle!

"You keep to your hole below," Jeffries called. "That way we've got him. By morning, at least."

This was no bluff. Jeffries had diagnosed the situation, surely and efficiently, gaining the one spot which rendered Matthew's shelter untenable with the coming of daylight. He and Walder had reversed the situation. They could wait.

Well, Matthew had no one to blame but himself. He had gambled on the element of surprise, tossing out the chance that anyone might reach the vantage point atop the cliff. Anyway, the damage was done. Matthew's big problem was to abandon the pinnacle. And Walder undoubtedly was ready by now to check that move. He had his choice of a dozen well-defended spots, all within six-gun range.

Jeffries spoke again, and this time he addressed Matthew. "So you tried to ambush us, Jett? You'll have that to report to that whiny-voiced cub of yours, when you meet him in hell."

Matthew made no reply. Jeffries was using his trick. Surprising how often men could be goaded into action thus. "You know who put slugs into Clee's carcass?" Jeffries jeered. "I did. The fool was

trying to use his rifle. About like the one you're using. You wouldn't have liked that, Jett. Seeing him on the ground, legs kicking. But that's what you're going to be doing—soon."

Jeffries was talking like a man pretty sure of the final outcome.

But was he?

Matthew grew tense with the thought. Then the answer came to him.

THE moon already was skirting the summit to the west, shadows creeping across the trail. Those shadows would scale the cliff soon, lifting from the pinnacle. Jeffries had realized that.

"Because he ain't got any rifle after all," raced through Matthew Jett's mind. "He's got that six gun of his'n, and that makes us even."

Walder had to know that, of course. He was waiting for Matthew to grow panicky and try to quit the pinnacle while there still was light enough to see him. Maybe Walder didn't want to wait in that tiny little valley for daylight. In that case the man would wait till the moon was completely gone. "They'll come then," he reasoned. "They'll come from either side, guns smoking."

Yes, and they might succeed too. A man with the agile mind Jeffries had shown he possessed, had a good chance to get him at close range, with Walder attacking from the other flank.

Jeffries and Walder were waiting, hoping, not for daybreak but for Matthew to make a break. Now the former was talking again, but to Walder. "Might take a snooze, Mel," he called. "No hurry at all."

Matthew pondered likely moves. He felt a chunk of stone beside his waist. It weighed probably ten pounds. Thoughtfully he twisted his body, shoving the slab toward the crevice above where the pinnacle was already in the shadows. Bit by bit he worked the chunk to the edge. Lifting a boot, he pushed it off very gently.

The stone slid at first, then crashed a dozen feet, rolling to the valley floor. Matthew was scanning the area between him and the cliff. There was no movement. Unworried, Matthew selected another

chunk, waited for five minutes, then repeated the procedure. And this time Matthew added details. He grunted, uttered a burst of profane words, and the shadow that was Mel Walder materialized across the way. Matthews saw the movement, shifted his rifle. There was enough light for a man who had fought it out in moonlight before. The gun spoke, the crash of its speaking hurtling back from the cliff. One of the horses broke into a run, and Matthew Jett remained prone, searching the gloom, till he saw the outline of something dark upon the ground. Not for moments did Matthew move. Now he lifted his body. It was a calculated risk he must take. There was no challenging slug from below. Walder was finished.

"All right Jeffries," Matthew called. "I'm standing up."

"Damn you Jett, you won't leave here alive."

"Hold your words. I'm coming."

Jeffries made no reply, and Matthew let himself down from the pinnacle, feeling carefully for the tiny ledges in the darkness, till he had negotiated the steep part of the going. For a time he waited, crouched at the foot of the column. Jeffries was shifting position, of course. He had two courses. Either he must get away, or come in closer. And Matthew reckoned that Jeffries wouldn't run away. He hadn't behaved like that sort of man. "Acts like a mountain man," he thought. "Cept he ain't got a rifle, and it bothers him."

Now he began to crawl, clinging to the dark side of the valley wall. He had to pass Walder's body. Somewhere along here Jeffries had begun his climb. But he wouldn't come back this way. Jeffries would circle.

"The hosses," Matthew thought. Sooner or later the man would go to them. If Jeffries didn't find him, he'd ride for help as a final alternative. And to make that act certain, he'd make a try before daylight to get one or both animals back down the trail, where he could mount and ride off without danger.

This business had to be finished before daylight. Matthew was conscious of a weariness, and the weight of too many years was upon him. Jeffries was younger.

He could crawl around, climb steep cliffs and not have aching legs, temples which throbbed and a mounting desire to rest indefinitely. But the burden of this long journey, and the showdown with the killers of Matthew Jett's son, had to be his.

MATTHEW was crawling slowly toward the horses when he heard a scuffling sound above, then the slide of stones. A pebble hit first, then a shower, and Matthew was pounded by the mass. The stone which snapped his right leg struck with the force of an anvil, and now, for maybe several minutes, the slide kept up, dwindling very slowly. A voice grunted, and Matthew heard the soft scuffle of boots as Jeffries scrambled to safety above.

Fighting the pain, Matthew moved the debris from before his face. His head was bleeding, but his arms were all right, and he shook the rifle gently to free it of dirt. Rubble covered him from waist down and the fractured leg added to complications.

Jeffries didn't know what he had accomplished! That fact was obvious. The man was clinging to the cliff side now, not daring to move till he was certain of a pathway to greater safety. Matthew attempted to twist his body for a look and the pain was too much to bear. He went limp for seconds, fighting the moan his protesting body tried to give.

His fingers brushed a slender bit of shale and Matthew let his head turn, this time very carefully, so that he could observe the cliff wall. Jeffries had to be up there, and very near. In six-gun range now. With sudden resolution Matthew grasped the bit of shale, lifted his right arm and threw it.

There was no reaction, and Matthew knew he couldn't make that effort again. It hurt too much. Jeffries had to be waiting, watching. But—

One of the loose horses appeared almost above Matthew, head visible against the stars, nose extended. The animal let out a sniff, curious at the man smell, and a blur of copperish light exploded, not more than twenty feet above Matthew. The horse screamed, undoubtedly hit, plunging off, to stumble and go to thrashing with its legs.

But Matthew paid no attention to that. He had ignored the terrible pain in leg and hip, working with tremendous exertion till he was free to the waist, able to sit straight. Holding in focus the blinding flash, he made out the darker blot against the stone face.

He held his breath, sighted at it.

The rifle crashed once, the force of the shot throwing Matthew back to the ground. Everything was risked in that shot, his life and the avenging of Clee's murder. And Ben Jeffries came sliding down, to hit the valley floor within arms' reach of Matthew. He fell head foremost, and his body sobbed for life which it couldn't hold. Matthew waited, rifle muzzle almost touching the man, till Jeffries no longer sobbed for air. Then he sank back to wait for morning, while the remaining horse raced down the trail, hoofbeats sinking rapidly.

Matthew thought he was dreaming when he heard voices. Dawn had come and he had slept. He stared, still in the grip of his misery, and made out the figure of Daniels and two other men. They gazed about, at the downed horses and bodies. "Over here," Matthew croaked. "I'm done buried, and I got a busted leg."

They dug him out, a look of awe in their

faces. "Jeffries and Walder," one of the men kept repeating.

"And these others—the ones who did their dirty killing!"

"We heard the shooting," Daniels explained. "Finally I figured I had to come, Jett. I talked Doc Shedd and Cleburne into coming with me. We're old men, but—well, I couldn't believe you'd tackle them single handed, even after you told me. Then we heard shooting up here, and when Walder's horse hit town we organized. You'd better stay out here, Jett, and be our marshal. You'd keep The Purgatory clean."

Doc Shedd was working on Matthew's leg, fixing it so that he could be put astride a horse. A shot of liquor Daniels had brought along made him feel less weary. He shook his head. "Thankee, Mister Daniels," he said, "but I got to go back. Clee's dead and I reckon he can sleep in peace. And I don't care about the mine. None of my folks needs it. We got a corn crop to put in next spring. And the old woman wouldn't let me stay longer anyways," he smiled ruefully.

"She likes for me to stay at home," he added, "where I got to act peaceable, most of the time."

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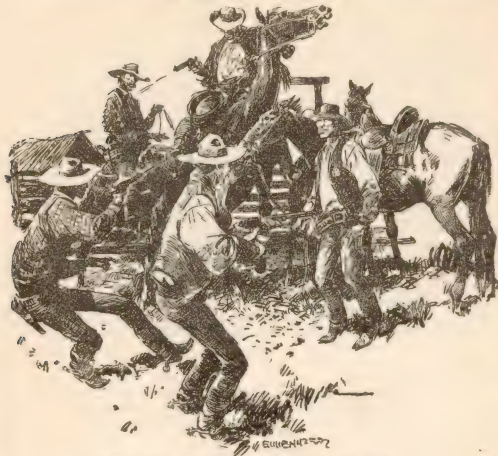
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LOBO INTO LAW-DOG

By W. V. ATHANAS

Big Judd Garth's voice was deadly: "I'll bet the whole Star Range that nobody can fade my draw." But the saddle-bum in the *jugado* just grinned and said, "I'm callin' you!"



Chan thumbed back the hammer and let it drop again . . .

THE JAILER HAD ASTHMA, and he wheezed and bubbled deep in his chest as he made a laborious business of unlocking the cell door. The huge key made a muffled snicking deep in the big box lock, and the door squealed as he pulled it to him.

"All right," he said, in his grumbling old man's voice. "Come on out of it."

Chan Martin swung long, slightly bowed legs off the bunk and groped for his boots.

They had been expensive boots once, but now the toes were scuffed and the high heels were run over. He stamped them on, and ran a combing hand through the unkempt black mane of his hair. Then he found his hat, and tramped out into the aisle of the jail.

"All right," grumbled the jailer, "all right, go on. The sheriff said you could go. Just don't go makin' trouble."

"I'll take my things," said Chan. He

rubbed a hand across the black three-day stubble on his jaws.

"What things?" inquired the jailer, annoyed. "You hadn't nothin' but the clothes on your back when you was throwed in."

Chan brought his rangy body around with easy grace and gave the old man a direct look. His eyes were sharp and intent in his high-cheeked and big nosed face, and there was a hint of reckless force in his voice.

"I had a jack-knife and two silver dollars," he said. "I'll have them now." It was not voiced as a request.

"Trouble?" inquired a new voice.

Chan took in the man that sat easily in the chair behind the desk. Youngish, very direct eyes, short dark mustache, with a well-cut suit that cost money. He had one polished boot cocked up on an opened drawer. His spurs were silver, ornately carved and inlaid.

"You the sheriff?" asked Chan.

"No. I'm Judd Garth."

"Then it's none of your business, is it?" inquired Chan bluntly. He turned back to the jailer, but the old man was hobbling around him to hang up his keys.

"Let's say I'm going to make it my business," said Garth. "You figuring to go to work around here?"

"Doubt it," said Chan. "Where the hell is the sheriff?" He felt Garth looking him over closely, and he said, "No use trying to remember if you saw my face on a dodger. My hands are clean."

Garth's lips made just the slightest quirk. "I guess I'd better lay it on the line," he said. "I don't like you tough drifters hanging around. Star can use another hand. If you won't work, you had better get out of the Basin."

"What are you paying?" asked Chan quietly.

"Forty and found. Sixty for a good man. A hundred for a helluva good man."

"And ammunition," said Chan. It wasn't a question. Garth shrugged.

"I'm not that good a man," said Chan disdainfully. "And I'll be damned if I put in a lifetime of chousing your cows or anybody else's at forty a month. Sleep in the rain and break your bones on the rough string, and when you're stove up and use-

less, some farmer will take pity on you and give you a job feeding his wife's chickens for your bed and meals. Hell with it."

GARTH got smoothly to his feet. "You'll leave then," he said. It wasn't a question either. "Drifters hanging around mean cattle missing and trouble generally. Can't have it. If you won't go to work get out of town." He nodded to the jailer and walked out of the room.

Almost instantly the door opened again, and a solid, heavy man tramped in, his silver star making a splash of light on his chest.

"Charley," he said to the jailer, "get Joe." He went straight across the room to his desk and started piling papers from a drawer on the desk top.

Chan watched him a moment, and then tramped across the room to stand directly before the desk.

"I'll have my things," he said mildly.

The sheriff looked up with an exasperated grunt.

"What things?"

Chan said patiently, "The two dollars and the jack-knife you took off me last night."

The sheriff focused his eyes on him sharply for the first time. He saw a tall man in worn clothing, his boots shiny at the instep from stirrup wear, but without spurs.

Then he said, "You're the drunk Joe brought in last night. Young feller, you drink too much fighting liquor."

"You've showed me the error of my ways with a night in your jail. Don't try to give me a lecture too. You're not the sky-pilot type."

The sheriff looked at him speculatively.

"Maybe you need another night to learn," he said.

"Yeah?"

For an instant the little reckless rebellious flame lit up Chan's eyes, and then he shook his head.

"I've learned all I'll ever learn that way," he said. "Give me my things, and I'll get out of your way."

The sheriff grunted again and pulled a paper sack from another drawer. He

spilled the contents on the desk, and shoved the knife toward Chan.

"The two dollars will about pay your fine," he said.

"I'll stick around for breakfast, then," said Chan. "That's my last dollar."

"Oh, hell," grunted the sheriff tiredly, and he shoved one of the silver dollars after the knife. "This'll get you breakfast and a drink. If you want a job, catch one of the freight wagons down the basin. Judd Garth can always use another hand."

Chan nodded and picked up the knife and the dollar. As he turned away from the desk, the side door opened and a young man, wearing a deputy's badge and a large bruise on his cheek, tramped into the room. He stiffened as he saw Chan, and he gave him a long hostile look. Chan looked pointedly at the bruise and grinned faintly. Then the deputy went to the desk and spoke to the sheriff.

"Joe," said the sheriff. "It's him all right." He picked up one of the papers and showed it to Joe. "Jim, down at the livery, said it was Baggot, when he left his horse there. This circular clinched it. There's five hundred in it, for the arresting officer. Let's go after it."

Joe said dubiously, "John, he's wicked. He's killed two men who tried to take him already. I don't like it. He's on the run, or he'd have left the livery unsaddle. As it is, he's just graining the animal, and eating, himself. He'll be proddy."

"Dammit," retorted the sheriff, "all I want of you is to move in on him from the back room. If I brace him alone, he'll take a chance on it."

Chan stood quietly against the wall, and rolled a smoke. He pinched the limp sack, decided there was enough for one more thin cigarette, and stuffed it back in his shirt pocket.

"I say we'd better get some more help," said the deputy.

"Two fifty apiece," said the sheriff. "That's a nice bonus, Joe."

"I don't like it," said Joe.

CHAN dug into his pocket for a match, and his fingers found the silver dollar. He hesitated, then shrugged and flipped the coin into the air and let it spat

back into his palm. Heads.

"I'll get him for you," he said conversationally.

The two heads snapped around sharply. "You still here, drunk?" inquired Joe.

"Still here," retorted Chan briefly, "I'll get him for you," he repeated.

"What's the catch?" inquired the sheriff. "What's your game?"

Chan gave him a slight sardonic smile.

"Two hundred and fifty dollars," he murmured. "I gather you want this man. I want that money. If I collect your man, I make my stake. If I don't, you're not out anything."

"Look, drunk . . ." said Joe in a jeering voice.

Chan moved easily away from the wall. The flame was leaping in his eyes and his twisted smile made a little flash of white against the black stubble on his face.

"It wasn't easy," he said softly, "to bring me in drunk. Would you want to try me now?"

Joe stiffened, and then he took in the easy cat-like grace of this tall, wide man, and the reckless glint in his eyes.

"Don't throw your voice at me," he said sullenly.

Chan ignored him, and gave his attention to the sheriff.

"Want to buy in?"

The sheriff considered it a moment. "What's your proposition?" he inquired.

Chan shrugged. "Swear me in, and I'll go get this man. I get half the reward money, on delivery, and you can take all the credit you want."

"I don't know," said the sheriff worriedly.

"All right," Chan said, and shrugged. He dug up a match and lit his cigarette.

"You'll go after him alone, then," said the sheriff. Chan nodded.

"What do you think, Joe?" inquired the sheriff.

Something was beginning to please the deputy. "I say fine," he said. "I say, let's find out how good this drunk is. He looks tough, he acts tough, let's see how he stacks up with Baggot."

The sheriff considered a moment, drumming his fingers on the desk, looking hard at Chan.

"All right," he said finally. "You are hereby appointed a special deputy. Raise your right hand."

Chan, with his twisted grin, solemnly swore to uphold the laws of the county and of the state, and took the badge the sheriff slid across the desk to him.

"I'll need a gun," he said.

The sheriff got up and unlocked a wall chest and brought out a belt and holster. Chan swung the wide belt about his waist and drew the gun. It was one of the new '72 model Colts, and it balanced sweetly in his hand. He punched out the loads, spun the cylinder and tested the trigger pull.

It was hair-fine, touchy as a balanced needle. His grin widened.

"All right," he said. "Where is he, and how will I know him?"

"Name's Drake Baggot, blond, about twenty, size of me without the belly, wearing gray pants and a dark vest. Flat-top Montana hat. Looks like he's been on the trail a week and needs a shave. He's in the Butte Cafe, down the street."

"All right," said Chan, and tramped to the door.

Joe said jeeringly, "Don't stub your toe, drunk."

Chan stopped in the door to look back. "My name is Martin," he said. "Remember it. You'll be using it from now on."

Joe opened his mouth, but the sheriff said sharply, "Drop it, Joe." Chan gave them a little smile and went out.

HE spotted his man instantly at the Butte. He occupied the stool at the far end of the counter, and he looked up quickly at Chan's entrance. Chan let his eyes go on by. The Butte was a half-hundred other Cowtown eating houses, with a long pine counter, round-seated stools, and an all-pervading odor of fried food. The customer next to Baggot had a nearly empty plate, and Chan sat down with this man between him and Baggot.

"What's for breakfast?" he asked the waitress.

"Ham, eggs, biscuits, coffee."

"Good enough. Can I have some coffee now?"

The man between them chased the last bit of bacon around his plate with his fork,

set down the heavy crockery mug with a thump and rang a half-dollar on the counter. Baggot watched alertly as the man rose, then turned his attention to his own meal, a double order by the size of the portions.

Chan made a long reach for the sugar bowl when his coffee came, and stirred his cup. Then he pulled the badge out of his shirt pocket with his tobacco sack and held it in his hand as he rolled the cigarette.

Baggot said, "More coffee, Gorgeous," to the waitress.

Chan, without looking directly at him, slid the sugar bowl down the counter—and then sent the star skittering after it.

Baggot jerked his hand instantly off the counter top.

"Better not," said Chan quietly. He had the gun in his hand, barrel level with the counter top. Baggot relaxed, and looked at him carefully.

"You're not a lawman," he said. He did not appear to be ruffled in the least. He reached slowly and carefully with his right hand to stir sugar into his coffee.

"Just temporary," murmured Chan. Baggot looked at him sharply.

"What's in it for you, friend?" he asked.

"Two hundred and fifty bucks," said Chan easily. "Nothing personal, you understand. It isn't the principle, it's the money in the thing."

Baggot gave him a tight grin. "Cheap-skates," he said. "I'll do better than that. I'll pay twice that, and you never saw me."

But Chan shook his head. "Made my bargain," he said. "Try your bid on the sheriff."

He made a slight beckoning motion with the muzzle of the gun, and Baggot slid off the stool. Chan stepped in behind him and lifted the gun out of his holster.

"Now you just stand fast a second," he murmured, "While I feel the fat on your ribs."

He shook Baggot down, quickly and thoroughly, and netted a short gun tucked into the waistband under the shirt.

"Straight down the street," he said, "until you see the one with the bars on the window. That's it." Baggot shrugged and walked ahead of him into the wagon-marked dust that was the street.

THE sheriff was delighted. He was almost rubbing his hands as he said, "Bring him right on through here to the cell."

"I'll turn him over to you for that," said Chan. "I'll take my money now."

"Sure," said the sheriff heartily. "Be through in about a week. Soon as I write over to Luther County."

"The deal," retorted Chan, "was cash on delivery. He's delivered. Pungle up."

"Why now," said the sheriff worriedly, "that's . . ."

Baggot's shoulders lifted just the least bit, and he turned slowly so that Chan could see his grin.

"My offer still goes," he said. He looked like a blond kid with that wide grin and his blue eyes crinkled with amusement, until you really looked at his eyes. Then you remembered who he was.

The deputy Joe, grunted suddenly and moved away from the desk.

"Get back there, damn you," said Chan conversationally, and he allowed the gun muzzle to drift over an inch or so. Joe moved back. "I'll take my money," repeated Chan.

"But—" the sheriff said, protestingly.

Chan sighed. He pulled the gun he had taken from Baggot, made a long arm and dropped it in the man's holster.

"In just one-half a minute," he said, "I'm going to put up my gun. You can take it from there, sheriff."

To Baggot he said, "Remember, when I drop it, I'm neutral."

And Baggot's smile was wide and genuinely amused when he replied, "I'll remember it, friend."

"I'm not your friend," said Chan dryly. "I'll sell you for two hundred and fifty dollars."

Baggot shrugged and his grin widened. "So would I, in your position." Then he raised his voice and said jeeringly, "Better not dicker with this one, sheriff. He ain't bluffing a minute."

The sheriff's hands trembled on the edge of the desk, and he kept his eyes glued on the gun in Baggot's holster.

"Well?" inquired Chan, and then he heard another voice behind him.

"More trouble?" inquired Judd Garth.

Chan pressed his gun barrel against Baggot's ribs to remind him that he was still there, and then he moved easily so that his back was no longer toward the door. The sheriff half rose.

"Throw a gun on him, Mr. Garth," pleaded the sheriff. "He's going to turn this prisoner loose."

Garth said sharply, "What is this?"

Chan said grimly, "Ask him whose prisoner he is. He sure as hell don't belong to the sheriff until I'm paid."

"Well, John?" inquired Garth.

The sheriff showed signs of wilting. "He went out and brought in Drake Baggot here, Mr. Garth. I told him he'd get half the reward. But now he wants his money right now. And he gave Baggot back his own gun and threatens to turn him loose if I don't hand him two hundred and fifty dollars."

There was a hint of respect in Garth's arrogant gaze as he looked back at Chan.

"Pay him," he said.

"Hell, Mr. Garth, I ain't got that kind of money laying around here in the office. Who does he think he is?"

GARTH made a disgusted sound with his lips. He strode to the desk and took a wallet out of his breast pocket. He stripped out bills and dropped them on the desk.

"Suit you?" he asked over his shoulder.

"You act like a business man, Garth," admitted Chan. He reached out and took the gun again from Baggot's holster.

"No hard feelings?"

Baggot gave him his twisted grin. "No hard feelings. I'll be out of here before morning anyway—hit them for all they're worth."

"You will like hell," snorted the sheriff. He had his bluster back now, and he strode around the desk and took Baggot by the arm.

"Just hike right back there into that cell," he said. "I guess we'll be able to take care of you."

Baggot stood stock still.

"Take that stinking hand off of me," he said with icy venom, "or I'll kick your fat gut right up into your throat."

The sheriff jerked his hand back and

laid it on the butt of his gun, and cursed him bitterly.

"These gas-bags," said Baggot to the room at large, "make me sick to my stomach." He walked into the cell alone, and pulled the door shut behind him.

Chan picked up the money, folded the bills and stuck them in his shirt pocket. Then he unbuckled the belt and tossed the gun and holster onto the desk with a solid thump. He tossed the badge on top.

Judd Garth looked at him over the cigar he was lighting.

"There's still a job open at Star," he said.

"You forget," said Chan with gentle derision, "I'm not just a tough drifter now. I'm a man of means, and I've got money to prove it."

But Garth did not rise to the bait. He kept his eyes steadily on Chan as he mused, "You won't work for me, at fighting wages. But you'll go out and bring in a man you never saw before, for the sheriff. I wonder why?"

Chan said briefly, "Know any other way of making two hundred and fifty dollars in ten minutes?"

Judd Garth looked at him long and soberly, making a decision.

"John," he called the sheriff, "hire this man."

"Aw, Mr. Garth," the sheriff protested.

"Put him on as tax collector and deputy," insisted Garth. He turned back to Chan. "You want a chance to make money, you say. All right, the tax collector is a fee office. You'll get ten percent of all the taxes you collect. The deputy's job pays eighty-five a month. No sleeping in the rain, no cows to follow, and good money."

"Too good," retorted Chan. "What's the catch?"

For an instant, Garth's arrogant shoulders squared. Then he served up a twisted smile.

"You've got a rough tongue," he murmured. "But I'll tell you why I'm bothering with you. I'd rather have you with me than running around loose. Take that any way you want."

Chan grinned faintly, and then considered it a moment, watching Garth's heavy, assured face.

"I'll try it a while," he said carelessly.

"Good," said Garth cheerfully. "Swear him in, John."

"He's already sworn in," retorted the sheriff sullenly. Chan filed that sullenness away in a corner of his mind.

"I'll have to find a room," he said, and he rubbed the stiff black growth on his jaws. "I'll check with you in the morning, sheriff."

"Don't hurry yourself," growled the sheriff. He watched Chan out of the room with no warmth at all.

WHEN Chan Martin walked into the office at ten o'clock the next morning, he was a new man. His jaws were shiny and blue from a recent shave and he had a haircut. His clothing from wide-brimmed hat to sharp-toed, high-heeled boots, was all new. Joe, the deputy, looked up at him sourly and grunted.

"Saw the shirt in Bonner's," he said. "Cost fifteen simoleons. Reglar damn dude, ain't you?"

The cigar between Chan's teeth tilted as he smiled.

"The best is none too good for me, Joe," he said. "I figure they made those dollars round so they would roll. They do nothing in your pocket except weigh you down. Where's the sheriff?"

"Rode out to Star," said the deputy. "Couldn't wait for you to finish out your beauty sleep, so he left these tax papers here for you to handle."

Chan picked up the bundle of tax assessments and rifled through them. He squinted at a couple of the totals, and whistled softly. Then he picked up a pencil off the desk and did a bit of quick figuring on a scrap of paper.

After that, he whistled again.

"Very interesting figures," he murmured.

"Yeah, the sheriff thought so."

Chan took the cigar from between his teeth. "So the sheriff was collecting before."

"Uh-huh."

Chan chewed his cigar again. "Pardon my curiosity," he said gently, "but what caused him to give me this particular plum?"

Joe gave him a disgusted look. "Think he had anything to say about it?"

"Garth, you mean?"

"Look," said Joe. "I'll draw you a picture. Star, that's Judd Garth's spread, takes up the biggest half of the Basin. His old man built it up, and Judd's made it bigger. They built this country, and this town, out of a howling wilderness. This town sets on his property, as a matter of fact. Star pretty near supports it. So when Judd Garth says jump, the sheriff and everybody else just natcherly pops right up on their hind legs."

Chan looked again at the papers.

"I assume," he said idly, "that the same applies to the assessor?"

"What do you think?" growled Joe.

Chan's smile was thin and crooked. "I'm not paid to think," he murmured. "Just to collect taxes."

He got a horse at the livery stable, and inquired his way around to the various places mentioned on the tax sheets he carried. Then he rode out.

HIS first client was herding a scrubby bunch of stock along the road toward his house. He admitted his identity readily, and merely grunted when Chan told him his errand.

"Come on to the house," his man said. "I don't carry no money with me."

He swung down and strode into the house, leaving Chan to wait, and he paid his taxes with worn and frayed bills. He took his receipt and stuffed it into his pocket without looking at it. Chan swung up onto his horse.

The man said bitterly, "You can tell your boss I'm sellin' out, deputy. He can have the whole damned shebang, and welcome. You can tell him if it's any satisfaction to him, he's whipped me."

Chan shrugged. "I'll tell him," he said.

The man looked from his own tattered sleeve to Chan's dark blue shirt of thin tight-woven wool.

"By George," he said in the same bitter voice, "I should have sucked along too." Then he stumped back into the house.

Chan turned it over in his mind as he rode the next ten miles, and it made a bit-

ter taste in his mouth. Then he let his lips relax and he patted the sheaf of papers in his pocket. One dollar of every ten he collected was his, and the day's ride should fatten his pocket appreciably.

"Hell with it," he decided, and lighted up a fresh cigar.

He was in his usual state of sardonic cheerfulness when he rode into the next place. Arthur Ordman, the tax slip said. Three hundred twenty acres, improved. Water rights filed on Bull Creek. Tax—Chan took another look and let a soundless whistle—tax, \$320.50!

The yard was bare, but showed signs of having been raked and swept of litter. There were flowers bordering the long porch. And the house, though unpainted, was tight and trim.

A noisy little dog exploded from under the porch and charged him, barking to burst his lungs. He circled Chan's mount at a safe distance, still keeping up a steady wow-wow-wow that made the horse nervous.

Chan swore mildly, and tightened the reins, and then Ordman came to the door. He paused, a dimly seen figure through the screen, and then made the motion of a man setting down a rifle against the door jamb. He'd been interrupted at his dinner, for he was still chewing as he stepped out onto the porch.

"Come off it," he said to the dog, and "Howdy," to Chan.

"Howdy," said Chan in reply. "I'm the new tax collector."

Ordman's body stiffened just a trifle, and he rammed his heavy hands deep in his pockets. All the friendliness was wiped off his wide middle-aged face.

"All right," he said finally, "what's the bad news?"

Chan looked at the paper and kept his voice carefully devoid of expression.

"Three hundred twenty dollars," he said, "and fifty cents."

Ordman leaped forward and brought his hands out of his pockets. "Say that again?"

"Three hundred twenty dollars, and fifty cents. That's what it says on the paper."

Art Ordman let out a roar.

"Three hundred and twenty dollars! Why damn you, I'll see you in hell first!"

He slapped at the air with a calloused hand. "Why damn the nerve of you. I paid three dollars an acre for this whole damned thing. And now I'm going to pay a dollar an acre taxes? Not by a damned sight!"

"Why now," said Chan mildly, "I don't make out the assessments. I'm just paid to collect what it says on the papers here."

"You'll get paid nothing here. Just ride right on out of here and tell your blood-sucker he bit a little too deep this time. Go on, ride out!"

"Now, Dad," came a woman's voice.

Chan looked up and automatically touched his hat. A plump woman stood on the porch, twisting her apron with nervous fingers. Slightly behind her stood a girl, eighteen or so—and pretty, Chan decided instantly. He reluctantly brought his eyes back to Ordman.

"If there's some mistake," he said quietly, "I'll be . . ."

"No mistake!" shouted Ordman. "No damned mistake at all. I'm not standin' for it, that's all. Tell Judd Garth he can . . ."

"Dad!" said the woman again.

Ordman half-turned and batted again at the air before his red face. "Hush, woman. Now ride out, young bucko, and tell Garth to go to hell!"

Chan let a faint grin creep out.

"I'll tell him," he said gravely. He touched his hat again. "Good day ma'am—miss." Then he looked again at Ordman. "I'll pass the word along," he repeated. Then he rode out.

HE grinned again when he saw Garth just entering the jail office ahead of him. He walked up close behind.

"Art Ordman says you can go to hell, Garth," he said conversationally.

Judd Garth wheeled violently and said through his teeth, "Don't ride your toughness too far, Martin."

Chan said mildly, "I was just passing the word along as I heard it." But the little reckless flame was warming his eyes.

Judd Garth considered him a moment, and then decided to drop it for the nonce. "Just what did he say?" he inquired.

Chan repeated it for him without embroidery. Garth stood turned half away,

listening intently, and then he clapped a fist softly into his palm.

"John," he said to the sheriff, "What is the rule on default of tax payments?"

The sheriff rubbed his chin. "If they're three years delinquent, the property is bound over for a sheriff's sale," he said. "The bids must be big enough to clear all taxes and expenses."

"How does Ordman stand?"

"Right up to date. This years taxes can't be claimed as delinquent for another month or so yet and, if he pays this year's any time in the next two years, he's still clear except for interest and penalties."

Garth considered a moment, heavy, solid, infinitely self-assured.

"And if there was a flaw in his title?" he asked finally.

The sheriff said patiently, "Some one would have to file a claim against him, and then he would take it to court. The flaw would have to look good in court."

The deputy, Joe, broke his silence. "Be easier," he said jeeringly, "to shoot up the place five nights a week for a few weeks—and then just move in."

Garth said absently, "No, I want to go easy on the rough stuff."

"Sure," grunted Joe, and only Chan caught the irony in his tone, "let's keep it nice and legal."

Garth chewed his lip a moment, and then said, "Have the title clerk check over the records, John. I'll talk to you later."

Chan got a meal, and then rode out again. It was always the same. Some of them cursed him, either openly and violently, or silently, with their eyes. But most of them paid on the line.

He spent the evening alone on the porch of the hotel, his blank gaze on the dark street, silently worrying his cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. He reviewed his day's work, and remembered faces, and finally he pitched his cigar end into the street and went up to bed. His thoughts were not good company.

HE RODE out early the next morning, and he did not take the tax papers with him. He followed the freight road down the basin, turned at the foothills, and kept to a long ridge, roughly parallel-

ing Bull Creek. Before noon, he found himself looking down on the Ordman place.

He had the grace to grin at himself and his roundabout way of coming, without admitting to himself the reason for it.

The dog came out to meet him, yapping with force enough to jerk himself back half a pace with every bark. A brisk clanging in the blacksmith shop stopped suddenly, and Ordman strode out. He picked up a rifle that leaned on the door-jamb of the shop as he came.

"Well?" He did not ask Chan to alight.

Chan reached up and unpinned the badge on his pocket flap and dropped it into the pocket.

"This isn't official," he said. "I'm just visiting this time."

"So?" grunted Ordman.

Chan stirred in the saddle, but received no invitation to step down. He crooked a leg around the saddle-horn and fished out a cigar.

"Smoke?" he inquired politely.

"No," said Ordman shortly. Chan shrugged and lighted up. He did not see the girl.

"I saw your stock as I rode down," he said. "Good looking stuff."

"Should be," returned Ordman. "I'm breeding for weight, and I cull damn close. A small fat herd for me. I don't own a whole county to graze."

Chan raised his eyebrows. "Referring to Star?"

"I ain't talking about Chicago. Now suppose you state your business."

Chan sighed and shifted legs on the saddle horn. "I told you. I'm just visiting. Raise your own hay?"

Ordman eyed him with calculation.

"You'll have to excuse me," he said dryly. "The only visits I ever get from Garth or his men cost me money."

The woman's voice came from the house.

"Dad! Dinner." Then she caught sight of Chan. "Oh! Whenever you're ready."

Chan said, "I'll be going, then. Don't want to keep you from your meal."

He could almost see the struggle going on in Ordman. His hatred for Garth and his men and his works was probably the most positive force in his mind. But, in

this land where no man was turned from the table, it violated his sense of fitness to let a man ride on at mealtime.

Finally he hunched his shoulders and said grudgingly, "Get down. Always room for another plate on the table."

Chan said doubtfully, "I don't want to impose." That much was courtesy, and the reply came automatically to Ordman's lips.

"Get down, get down. Throw away as much as we eat."

Chan found he had conscience enough left to feel a mild inward shame at his own actions. Then he swung down and followed Ordman into the house.

Mrs. Ordman was flushed from the heat of the stove and the excitement of company, and she bustled around setting another place and breaking out jars of pickles and jellies that Chan was sure had not been intended for this meal.

He ate silently, and with manifest appreciation, and gained the appreciation of a good cook whose food is complimented by earnest attention to it.

THE GIRL sat opposite him, and seldom raised her eyes from her plate. She had ventured only a hello, when they were seated.

He had replied in kind, and then fallen to studying her unobtrusively.

And up close, she was pretty. She had her mother's pleasant roundness of features, but there was a hint of her father's tenacity in the chin and in the even curve of her brows.

He learned her name, for her mother called her Beth, and he practiced the sound of it in his mind. Beth Ordman. A nice name. A proper name. He found himself with queer little half-formed wishes in his mind. A sort of desire that a man's doings might be wiped off the records, as a slate is cleaned when an improper total has been struck.

He wasn't aware of it, but his lips quirked in the beginning of his sardonic half-smile at his own imaginings. He was not aware that the girl saw it; or that despite herself, she liked it.

They pushed back their plates finally, and this time Ordman accepted a cigar.

They smoked a while in silence, while Chan followed Beth's deft movements as she cleared the table.

Finally he asked idly, "How much land have you got in hay, Mr. Ordman?"

Ordman said grudgingly, "Little over a hundred acres. Mostly volunteer timothy and clover. Seeded some alfalfa—broadcast it from a wagon and let it to itself. Came in good and strong." His natural farmer's enthusiasm in talking of his land and his plans kept him on it.

"A few picked head of stock," he said, "and your own winter feed. A few trees for fruit and the woman's got a garden. The cowmen cuss us for sod-busters, but it works in Ohio, and it'll work here. Makes a man a pretty good living."

Chan nodded agreement, and then asked, "What is the price of potatoes?"

Ordman thrust out a lip and considered. "Don't rightly know. The woman's garden supplies most of that stuff."

Mrs. Ordman said from the sink, "Five and six cents a pound. I don't buy much, but I see the prices in the stores."

Chan said, "Things like that would be high in a place where everything is freighted in. Ever think how many potatoes you could raise in that hundred acres of hay ground?"

Ordman looked at him in something like amazement.

"Why, man," he said, "this is cow country. You don't look like a sod-buster to me."

Chan said dryly, "I don't look like a tax collector either. But I can see a dollar a long way off."

Instantly he wished he had bitten his tongue. He could feel the warmth flee from the room on the heels of his words. The women exchanged looks, Beth's smile vanishing before a quick frown.

Ordman pushed his chair back and said heavily, "Well, work to do, and I ain't getting it done here. Better get at it."

Chan rose too, and thanked the women for the meal.

"Goodby, Mrs. Ordman—Miss Beth," he said, and found his hat and tramped out with Ordman. The man, despite his words about work to do, stood stolidly in the yard until Chan rode out.

CHAN rode for half a mile and then circled around the Ordman property. He followed Bull Creek only a short way, and then he had to take to the higher ground, for the creek came out of a steep-banked ravine, clogged with brush and saplings. Within a few hundred yards he was forced away from the creek by brush that his horse refused to buck.

He kept his horse climbing, heading for a high point from which he might see the basin, and finally came out on a bare knob that gave him a long view.

He could see Ordman's buildings like matchboxes set in a plot of green felt, a plot that stood out like a jewel in the drabness of the rough range land that surrounded it. Bull Creek turned abruptly at the foot of the Ordman place and spilled down over the rimrock into the brakes beyond.

The Basin proper was an eye-stretching length, footed in the Blues, twenty miles away. He thought he could even see the town, a collection of faraway specks that jiggled in the haze. Sunset was gilding the knob when he finished his look and turned down into the shadows below him.

It was deep dusk when he cleared the Ordman place and struck the trail. A few minutes later he spotted the fire.

It lay off to the side of the trail in the brush, unconcealed, and the smell of boiling coffee was mingled with the dry smell of smoke. He rode toward it.

"H'llo, the fire," he called. He got no answer. He rode ahead then, until he was in plain sight in the flickering light and pulled up.

He waited, that sardonic grin on his lips. A voice came out of the brush.

"Step down," it said. "You're just in time for coffee." He was not surprised when Drake Baggot stepped out into the firelight.

He said, "I thought I left you in jail."

Drake returned dryly, "I got out."

Chan grunted and looked around the fire.

"No cup," said Baggot. "You'll have to take it out of the pot." Baggot hunkered down by the fire and whittled a point on a stick. He unwrapped a chunk of bacon and speared it on the stick and held it

toward the fire. "Be ready in a minute," he said.

Chan set the coffee pot to the side to cool.

"How'd you get out?" he inquired.

"Walked out," said Baggot briefly. "Picked up my own gun on the way, and walked. Why? Do you think the sheriff will pay off on me again?" He was watching Chan with close attention, his blue eyes wide and innocent.

"I wouldn't know," retorted Chan dryly. "I made one stake off on you. I'm not piggish. Let the next bird make his."

"You know," said Baggot conversationally, "I found a wad of money on the sheriff's desk when I walked out. A good wad."

Chan looked up, and then back at the cooling pot.

"Didn't have my name on it, did it?"

"No," said Baggot, slowly. He kept his eyes closely on the bacon he was broiling.

"Had a funny dream, whilst I was in the pokey. Seems a fellow came up and talked to me, prophesied I'd find the door unlocked when I woke up. Said I'd find my gun hanging over the back of a chair. Seems to me he mentioned some money too. Funny thing—having a dream like that, and having it all come out. Mighty funny."

"Did he mention why the money?" asked Chan dryly.

BAGGOT looked up dreamily, his blue eyes quiet and naïve. "He mentioned a place with a fence around it," he murmured. "Creek running through it. He sort of hinted that he wouldn't cry if the place got shot up by a drifting bad one."

Chan kept his voice even, and seemed to be talking to the fire.

"The Indians say there's two spirits riding at a man's shoulder all the time. A white one and a black one. Right now I sort of see a picture. The man that shoots up that place is going to have a black spirit riding him. That spirit will ride him till he drops. The horse ain't born that's fresh enough or strong enough to keep ahead of him."

For an instant Baggot's thin crooked

grin faded. Then he said in a faintly injured voice, "I tell you, it was just a dream. I don't take stock in dreams. Besides, that wad wasn't big enough. I can match it, and double it." He dug into a shirt pocket and tossed a thick roll of bills across the fire. "Tell the man," he said, "that I come higher than that."

"Who?" inquired Chan innocently.

Baggot chuckled grimly, "Ask your Injun medicine."

Chan tipped up the pot and drank deeply. Then he set the pot down and pulled himself up.

"I'll be getting back to town," he said.

Baggot looked up at him from across the fire, and there was the something in his voice that comes to a man who has squatted by too many lonely, furtive fires.

"You'd be a good man to ride with, Martin."

"No," said Chan, "we're too much alike. One day we'd have to find out which was the best man."

"And?" prompted Baggot. His eyes were very blue and direct.

"I wouldn't like to find out," said Chan. "Either way." He caught the trailing reins of his horse and swung up.

"So long," he said, and turned his back on Baggot without the slightest qualm. He rode into the dark until he found the trail toward town.

He thought of many things as he rode. Of a girl named Beth, of green fields that stood out clean and sharp from the high knob, of a blond kid with a crooked grin and blue eyes who had edged just a step off the taut line he himself was riding. But mostly he thought of a girl named Beth.

JUDD GARTH turned impatiently on him when he tramped into the jail office the next morning.

"It's about time you showed up," he said impatiently.

Chan's cigar tilted as he gave Judd a tough grin.

"Nobody told me what the hours were."

Judd's chin came out just a trifle, but there was a hard jubilation boiling in him that made him overlook everything else of the moment.

"You'll earn a little of your deputy's pay today," he said and his teeth made a white flash under his close dark mustache.

"So?" murmured Chan, but he felt a bristling awareness stiffening his shoulders.

Judd Garth was holding it in, but a little of it came through as he stalked stiff-legged to the desk and slapped a hand on the paper there.

"You'll serve an eviction notice," he said, and again his teeth flashed. "It was a good hunch. John, here, had the clerk make a search of the records. There's a flaw in the title, and it's a good one. Old Joe Moss owned that place, owned it clear and free. And he lost it in a poker game. But he didn't give the winner the deed. He was drunk, and he just said, 'It's yours,' and walked out." He swung about and hiked a hip up on the corner of the desk.

"He was killed in a brawl, the winner, that is, and a nephew inherited. The nephew sold to Ordman, in Ohio, sight unseen, with Ordman to pay no cash until he saw the place. And what Ordman got was a contract of sale." He slapped his thigh and slid off the desk.

Chan hid his face with his cupped hands as he relit his cigar.

"What's the payoff?" he inquired through the smoke.

"A real stroke of luck," crowed Garth. "I remembered that old Joe Moss was holed up on a stump ranch on the rim. I had a man damn near ride a good horse to death up there last night, and I bought the deed off him, clear and legal. I own that place, and by hell, I'm going to evict Ordman, bag and baggage!"

"But," said the sheriff worriedly. "I . . ."

"No buts," snapped Garth. "I'm calling on you to serve this eviction notice. Then when I got possession, let him go to court all he wants to. The burden of proof is on him, and I'll drag it out till he's broke so flat he'll haul all he owns on his back!"

"Why now," said Chan quietly, "there's only three hundred or so acres there. Why go to all this trouble?"

Garth wheeled on him. "I thought you were smart, Martin. Don't you know he's got Bull Creek sewed up solid? He's got

every bit of water from the ravine to the brakes under fence. With water, I can open up another thousand, hell, two thousand acres of range there."

Chan asked quietly, "How big is Star?"

Garth said arrogantly, "Hell, nobody knows. Now, it will be Star from the Blues to the brakes. From edge to edge, the basin will be Star."

He tramped in a restless little circle in the office, unable to stand still.

"Come on," he said impatiently, "let's get going."

"You've got to be big, don't you, Garth?" asked Chan queerly.

"By George," crowed Garth, "I am big. You can't stand still and grow. My old man chopped Star out of the wilderness, and he made something from nothing. He shoved it from the Blues to the south rim. I've doubled it, in my time. Now, by George, I'll finish it! Come on, let's go."

Chan followed him out, his eyes a little sick.

JUDD GARTH rode a high-bred black, a sleek fiery animal that wore the Star high on its hip. The same symbol, two interlocked triangles that made a six-pointed star, was inset into the four points of Garth's saddle skirts in silver.

Garth rode as he walked, stiff and confident, square shouldered, with an arrogant tilt to his heavy head. He was silent, engrossed in his own plans, a cigar clamped between his teeth, the blue smoke curling back over his shoulder with metronome regularity.

The sheriff sat low in his saddle, slumped by his weight and his years. There was neither determination nor speculation on his broad face. He was simply the arm to Garth's purpose, Chan knew, and what the brain willed, that arm would do. Until it was called upon to act, the arm was in stasis, and patient.

Joe, the deputy, was equally negative to response. But somehow, Chan had an impression of still deep waters in Joe. He remembered Joe's dry bitterness at Garth's insistence on the letter of the law. He reminded himself not to forget Joe.

They rode up into the yard, and Mrs.

Ordman came to the screen to quiet the dog. Garth did not so much as touch his hat. "Where is your husband?"

"Salting," she replied. "Over in the north pasture." She was as abrupt in her way as Garth.

"Let's go," said Garth, pulling his mount around.

They found Ordman trying to fit a new block of salt and part of a used one into a box rack where they wouldn't quite fit. He looked up at their approach and quickly stepped toward his horse, a few yards away. The butt of his rifle stood out of the sheath on the saddle.

"Watch it," Garth murmured to the sheriff, who in turn said, "Joe!"

The deputy moved his horse up quickly and put it between Ordman and his mount.

"Better not," he said without expression. Ordman looked him hard in the eyes for a second, and then wheeled to face the rest of them.

His mouth was pulled down hard at the corners, and his eyes were bleak and unfriendly. But he made no remonstrance, and no further move.

"Well?" His eyes were fixed on Judd Garth.

The sheriff cleared his throat and moved forward, fumbling inside his vest for the paper.

Garth murmured, "Let's go down to the house first." The sheriff paused.

Ordman said bluntly, "I've got work to do. Whatever it is, you can tell me here."

Garth chose to ignore that. "Bring him along, John," he said. "Put a gun on him if you have to." He did not wait to see the order carried out.

Beth and her mother stood on the porch as they re-entered the yard. Ordman was in the van, with the sheriff behind. Joe, Judd Garth and Chan brought up the rear.

Chan was watching Beth closely, but her eyes came on him only in passing, cold and waiting. Her mouth was pulled tight.

Ordman said with a deadly quiet, "All right, what is it?"

Garth looked him over slowly, savoring the moment, and pulled the stump of his

cigar from between his teeth and tossed it on the ground.

"Serve it, John," he said, and he couldn't keep all the triumph out of his voice.

ORDMAN had dismounted, and the sheriff rode up to him and handed down the paper. Ordman unfolded it, and as he started to read, Chan swung down, fishing in a shirt pocket for a cigar.

He heard Ordman's outraged voice, and looked up sharply. He was between Joe and the sheriff now. Garth sat on his high-bred black, a little to one side.

"Eviction!" cried Ordman. "Eviction! Why damn you, I'll . . ." He wheeled and started for the porch, but Joe said sharply, "Hold it!" He had Ordman's rifle balanced across his saddle horn.

Beth said quite clearly, "Judd Garth, you thieving animal, I wish I were a man for a few minutes."

"Oh, shut your damned mouth," retorted Garth. He said it without heat, without even thinking.

Chan decided it was time to make his move. It was a relief to make a positive effort, and he realized he had been keeping his thoughts in a narrow passive stream ever since he had made up his mind. That had been in town. As the floodgates opened, the tension was gone, and he felt curiously light and free.

He let the little reckless fire run, and he stepped up to Joe's stirrup and said evenly, "Stay out of this, Joe."

"What?" demanded Joe, bringing his attention from Ordman to Chan.

"Keep out of this," repeated Chan, and then Joe swung the rifle barrel at him.

Chan caught it with his right hand, and his left hand found Joe's stirrup. He pulled on the rifle, and heaved upwards mightily on the stirrup. Joe rose up, his leg stiffened by the surprise of it, and then he frantically kicked his feet free of the stirrup as he was toppled from his saddle.

The horse shied and whirled at this indignity, and Joe scrambled away on all fours to escape its hooves. Chan took three long strides and tossed the rifle toward Ordman. When he stopped, he was facing Judd Garth.

"This is as far as it goes," he said. "All bets are called off."

It made not the slightest dent in Judd Garth's arrogant composure.

"Don't be a damned fool, Martin," he said almost gently. "You can't stop me."

Chan felt the steely temper of the man, and his narrow sardonic grin came out. "I'm doing it," he said.

Garth shook his head slowly and ponderously.

"No," he said.

Chan raised his voice without taking his eyes off Garth.

"Tear up that paper, Ordman." Then he said to Judd Garth, "Ride on out, Garth. The show's over."

Garth said quietly, "I thought you were smart, Martin. I can come back with fifty men and shoot this place to hell. What do you think you're doing?"

"No, you won't," retorted Chan, and it was as if he were reading Judd Garth's mind.

FOR Judd Garth was Star. And if Judd Garth was faced down now, he would have to come back by himself. Even then, it would be recalled that Star had come off second best this once. And it would never be the same again.

"All right," said Judd Garth. "All right." There was almost a sigh in his voice. But his eyes were narrowed and brutal and wise.

In that instant his hand dipped under the skirt of his coat and brought up his gun. And Chan knew he had been beaten to the draw. Ready and primed as he was, Judd Garth was demonstrating with more than words why Star had grown to what it was.

Chan heard the slap of his own hand on the walnut butt of his gun, and he thumbed back the hammer as he flipped up the barrel. Then the slug hit him.

It turned him aside, and his own bullet burned across the neck of Garth's highbred. The horse screamed and flung itself heedlessly away from the muzzle blast. Garth, already loosened in his saddle, kicked free of the stirrups and leaped clear.

But even as he landed with his heels

twisting in the clean swept earth of the yard, he was swinging the gun back into line.

Chan saw him through a blur. A tremendous weight rode his shoulders, forcing him double, and he thought despairingly that he was going down. He thumbed back the hammer and let it drop again.

Judd Garth swayed ahead, without moving his feet, and went to his knees. His hot, unwavering gaze was fixed on Chan's face, and his bulldog jaw was clamped in a tight mirthless smile. His hand tried to bring up the gun, and he reached across with his left hand to steady it. He was pitching forward as he pulled the trigger, and his gun loosed its last booming roar at Chan's feet.

Then unbelievably, he moved again. He pulled himself forward until he had an elbow under him, and he raised his eyes to Chan and spat blood from his lips.

He heaved words out with a breathless tortured gasping.

"Damn . . . Martin . . . Had a hunch. Tough drifters should have I Star" Then his head fell forward on his arm, and he drew one deep ragged breath.

Chan felt a wave of nausea curl over him, and reached up and cuffed his hat back from his beaded forehead with his gun still clenched in his hand. Then he remembered Joe and the sheriff.

Joe stood with his legs wide spread, paying no attention to the rifle that Ordman held loosely trained on him.

"Well, Joe?" He was surprised at the faintness of his own voice.

Joe gave a hint of a shrug. "I ain't had my orders yet," he said, and he turned a contemptuous glance at the sheriff who still sat stupidly in his saddle.

The sheriff moistened his lips. His chin shook, and he drew a deep shaky breath. He made as if to speak, and then Chan heard the light firm steps of Beth behind him.

He half-turned toward her in his surprise, but she reached out and took the gun from his unresisting hand.

"Get out of here!" she said fiercely to the sheriff. She held the gun at her side,

but her small thumb was on the hammer. "You sneaking coyote! You serve a paper! With Judd Garth ahead of you and Joe here behind you, you did what you were told, and that's all you ever did." She sent a sweeping hand around toward the huddled body of Garth.

"What will you do now? Garth is dead, and Star is dead."

The sheriff moistened his lips again. "Why, I . . ."

She cut in. "I'll tell you what you'll do. You'll ride out of here. And if you're smart, you'll resign before the Basin throws you out."

For an instant, the sheriff straightened under the tongue-lashing, and then he looked again at the body of Judd Garth, and he sank back into the saddle. He pulled his horse about without another word and headed toward the gate at a slow walk.

BETH caught her breath sharply, suddenly, and Chan reached out and took his gun back, and dropped it in the holster.

"You little wildcat," he said, half admiringly.

She came to him and leaned her head on his shoulder while little tremors of reaction shook her. He put an arm around her shoulder and held her to him.

"Don't anybody mind me," came Joe's dry voice. "I'll just be riding out. If you'll give me a hand loading up Garth, here."

Ordman's voice said, "Go on, Joe. I've nothing against you."

"I hope not," returned Joe, "because I figure there's a sheriff's job open. Maybe now a man can be a law officer without being a paper doll. So long."

"Here, man," said Ordman suddenly to Chan. "You're standing there bleeding to death. Get over here and let's have a look at you."

They led him to the porch, Ordman and Beth, and they were carrying a lot of his weight before they made it. Mrs. Ordman snipped his shirt off with her scissors, and they found the wound on his left side. It was a thumb-width gouge across his ribs, and one rib was obviously broken, though not shattered.

They doused it pretty liberally with raw alcohol, and bound him tightly with strips of a clean sheet, and when they were done, he was white and shaky, and his brow was beaded with sweat. Beth kissed him squarely on the lips.

"Thanks, doctor," he murmured. He reached for her with his good arm, but she moved away.

"You're a sick man," she said, "and I'm going to get you something to eat." She went into the house.

Ordman sat on the steps, puffing clouds from his pipe and staring across his fields.

"It ain't good manners," he rumbled, "to ask questions of why a man that saved your hide did it. But I'm wondering."

Chan grinned at his back and asked a question of his own.

"What'd happen," he inquired, "if a man was to plant a couple of hundred pounds of giant powder in the rimrock along the creek below here?"

"Don't know," returned Ordman. "Why?"

"I know," said Chan. "It would turn the creek. All that water that's wasted in the brakes would run below your bottom field and irrigate about three hundred acres alongside yours. I aim to do it."

Ordman turned to stare at him in a vast surprise.

"What are you going to raise?"

"Spud," retorted Chan blandly.

"You follow a plow?" Ordman laughed incredulously.

"Follow, hell! I'm going to stake my claim and throw a four-bottom riding plow in there behind six teams of horses. I'll put more ground to work than any of these clod-busters ever saw." He started forward and then sank back as his wound gripped at him.

"Star is dead. This basin will fill up with people. And they'll have to eat. The beef is here. Give them potatoes, and they're set. And I'll give them the spuds."

He leaned back in his chair and listened to Beth's voice in the kitchen.

"I can't be a drifter any more," he said, and he sounded not at all unhappy about it. "I've got to grow roots. But at the same time, I've got to play it smart. And this is the smartest way I know."

YELLOW EYES OF VOODOO

By DAN CUSHMAN

*The Mauser exploded . . . Warzeka
spun as though hit . . .*



Armless O'Neil stared helplessly into jungle gloom . . . Before him, a monstrous, glowing Thing of Evil Death looming closer, ever closer . . . behind him sly footsteps whispering, as angry gri-gri fetishers sought the defiler of the Eye of the Leopard!

IT WAS NIGHT AND THE drums were beating again. The hook-armed man could hear them as he lay inside his brown silk explorer's tent. They were message drums, two of them beaten together, blending in a strange, oscillating rhythm. After five minutes, the man squeezed out the coal of his Khartoum cigarette and crawled through the flap for a look at his Nebreb boys.

The Nebrebs were tall, dusty black na-

tives with feet that ran to elongated heel bones. There were eight of them, squatted around the glowing remains of a cookfire. They stopped talking the instant he appeared, and now they watched him with distended white eyeballs.

The hook-armed man walked across the tiny, jungle clearing and stopped with reddish fireglow underlighting his face. It looked metallic and saturnine, such a face as a Hindu might cast from copper.



"I should have left you behind and brought your women," he growled, speaking from the side of his mouth as though the words had an evil taste. "Tell me, are all Nebrebs cowards, or was it because your headmen wanted to rid his village of cowards that he sent such diggers of cassava roots to be my *assagai* men?"

He waited for an answer, his *veldtschoen* planted a trifle wide, right hand on the Mauser pistol at his hip, the hook which served as a left arm swinging free. He was a trifle under average height, but he had the shoulders and power of body to make him a big man. His complexion, burned the hue of Kimberly brick, indicated years in the tropics. He'd neither dehydrated nor grown fat. Sometimes you see a white man who thrives on heat, and whisky, and quinine.

The hook-armed man started to say something more, but the Nebreb *capito* lifted his right hand in a Moslem salute and spoke.

"The Nebreb is not a coward. With *assagai*, with arrow, with the bang-bang gun of the *bondele* my warriors fight the fiercest Mombishi, the Bakota, the Bakete. My warriors fight all others who eat, and breathe, and die. But no warrior can fight those whose blood is cold and thick like the river mud at first-light. Not even the bravest Nebreb can fight the warriors of darkness who kill without sound, like the blind mamba. We have heard the drums, *bwana*. We have heard the drums of the double tofuge, and they speak the language of death to our ears. The language of the Black Fetish."

"Black Fetish be damned."

THE *capito* boy stood with a suddenness that brought a clank from arm and leg bracelets. "*Bwana* will say words to bring the Black Fetish—"

"I said *Black Fetish be damned*." He slapped the Mauser and went on. "Behold this fetish. *Bondele* fetish. Thirty calibre, semi-automatic. Hear me, you Nebrebs, when I say that I will shoot the clammy insides out of any warrior that the Black Fetish sends against us."

The *capito* boy weaved his head and

said, "No. Not even *bondele*-gun is strong against the Black Fetish. Behold *Bonde-Doktor*. He had gun, but he is gone. Carried from tent with no sound, without opening the door. Even while native boys watch, the Black Fetish carried him away to eat his soul. Now the drums . . ."

The white man laughed. A brittle sound from one side of his mouth. He thrust out his hook and shook it in the *capito's* face,

"I tell you I will kill the Black Fetish. I, Armless O'Neil, will kill him, using the magic of East Chicago, Illinois. I will split him down the middle with my mighty hook. Do you hear me, you Nebrebs? I will split him down the middle just as I will split the first coward native that sneaks away from this camp."

The silence was taut and long-drawn as the blacks stared at him. He noticed that the message drums had stopped. The night had an empty, breathless quality. He knew what was on their minds. They thought the Black Fetish had heard his words, and that the drums were stopped while the fetish came through the night darkness to kill him.

After ten seconds had passed without disaster, the natives commenced breathing once more. It was obvious that the fetish had decided to let this white man live for a while. Perhaps the fetish would do with this hook-armed one what he had done with the *Bonde-Doktor* three nights before—carry him from his tent without so much as untying the tie-strings of the door.

O'Neil turned, his attitude still a study in contempt, crossed the clearing, and started down a footpath to the river. There was movement in dense shadow beneath the bokongu trees, and he noticed that Bobolongonga, his native boy was following.

Bobolongonga was a magnificent black from Katanga. His *djellaba* and green turban showed him to be a Moslem sanctified by a pilgrimage to Mecca, and hence, in theory, twice proof against the voodoo superstitions, but with a black it never quite worked out that way. No black man ever maintains the excellent fatalistic detachment of the Arab to whose lonely

nature alone the teachings of the Prophet have a living significance.

"*La Allah illi Allahi!*" O'Neil chanted, grinning when he saw Bobolongonga's distended eyeballs. "Or doesn't the Kingdom of Allah reach this far?"

Bobolongonga drew up, huge and ominous in his *djellaba*. He had a short-barrelled Mas rifle held close against his body, almost hidden by the folds of his robe.

His voice came in a low rumble, "As it is written, O *bwana-m'kubwa*, the Kingdom of Allah reaches to the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, and even unto the thousand-metre level of the hell-holes of Kimberley. But the spirits of darkness walk the earth, and——"

"In other words you believe in the Prophet by daylight and in the fetish by night. You're like those coward Nebrebs—you think the Black Fetish swooped down the other night and stole poor old Doc Chowan out of his tent."

"Is it not true, O Master, that the *djin* of evil wears the black turban——"

"Turban be damned! Doc Chowan got out of here on his own power, and he left me holding the bag for a hundred and twenty thousand francs, *Belge*, and if you think I'll let any washed-up Yankee scientist run out on that sort of dough after dragging me to this malarial sink-hole just because you and those Nebrebs—— Oh, the hell with it."

"But *Bwana!*—hear them, the drums of the double tongue beating thy soul from thy body——"

O'Neil jerked his shoulders in a short laugh and walked on through shoulder-high spear grass to the river. Bobolongonga stalked behind, still muttering.

"Oh, *Allah!* Where were Thou on the day I took service with this hook-arm, this madman? For the months of one rainy season I promised to be his carry-all boy, and now the years have become many as the fingers on the Devil's hand while my two wives weep for my return to Katanga."

O'Neil stopped along the Dormura River's swamp edge. The moon was not yet up, but there were stars out, reflecting from the vast, apparently stagnant surface.

He found another cigarette, removed some of the shredded tobacco from one end, and stuffed in a pinch of hemp blossom—a native *hashish*. He lighted the cigarette and inhaled deeply. Bobolongonga was talking again, his voice a low chant, his words addressed to Allah but intended for the more immediate hearing of Armless O'Neil.

"O Allah, behold thy Bobolongonga! Behold him with barely a *sou* in his purse or a whole piece of cloth large enough to cover the bare breadth of his fanny! Behold how your Bobolongonga hath sacrificed all for this hook-armed-white man! O Allah, give my *bwana* the strength to dig in his pants pocket and pay me the eighteen months back wages he oweth me that I may return to my weeping wives in Katanga."

"The hell with you," said O'Neil. "What good would money do you here? Forget about that fetish damndfoolery and help me track Doc Chowan down and I'll pay you with double compound interest."

"Money, money, *Alla-Allahi!* Money is good even in the blackness of the forest."

O'Neil hunkered on the heels of his *veldtschoen*, holding the hashish smoke for a long time in his lungs before letting it go. It took away the fever-fatigue of travel, the grinding headache of heat and quinine. And it helped him think of Doc Chowan in an impersonal light.

DOC CHOWAN was an American geologist it had been O'Neil's misfortune to meet at Kongolo just when he was on his way to Elizabethville for a few nights between clean white sheets and some food that didn't reek from *ashanti*. Doc had had two things in his favor—he was an American, and he had money in his kick. As a result, O'Neil had allowed the little stern-wheel boat to go upriver without him, choosing to sit with Doc and a couple bottles of Martel behind the screens of a local ghekko-menagerie called the Hotel du Royale Belge.

There he'd made a deal to guide Chowan to the Meevada villages, a place where he'd never been, somewhere in that unknown sinkhole of swamp and jungle lying between Nyangara and Lake Albert.

They started in a week, traveling past Stanley Falls to the mouth of the Aruwimi, thence on a tiny, mission steamer as far as Kolobiste, and after that for two hundred kilometers between solid walls of wilderness, jungle to a native village on stilts dignified by the man-makers with the name of Nouvelle Leopold.

There they hired Nebreb porters and went on, driving ever deeper into a vast, low-lying country ruled by a savage, half-known group of tribes lumped off under the name of *Meeyada*.

The Doc had professed to be in search of oil shale, and it was true that he was well supplied with the funds of the Federal Petroleum Company of New York, but he wasn't fooling O'Neil. He was too good a geologist to look for oil shale in a country where swamp and overburden lay two hundred feet deep.

Then, sometime during the hours of darkness three nights ago, the Doc had disappeared. He'd gone to his tent as usual. He'd closed the flap and sat around for a while with the candle lighted. Then the candle had gone out. There were sentries on duty all night. Nothing unusual. But in the morning, Doc was gone.

The flap was still secured on the inside. Of course, it would have been no particular trick to reach through from outside and tie it again in that manner, but O'Neil couldn't tell such a thing to the superstitious Nebrebs. Anyhow, he'd held the safari together as he went on uprifer, trying to pick up Doc's trail. And now, to make things worse, those double-tongued message drums were booming from the night around them.

O'Neil thought about those things while Bobolongonga still chanted of the spirits of evil. Finally he interrupted the big black by saying,

"Doc took his carry-all bag along, didn't he? And his rifle. And that Smith and Wesson. Why in hell would the Fetish want a Smith and Wesson gun?"

"Would the *bondele* leave without opening a door?"

"If he wanted to scare the hell out of my black boys he would."

Bobolongonga stood very tall with his huge forefinger uplifted. "Perhaps that

Doc himself was a creature of the evil spirits, O Master. Did he not carry the secret bundle? Did he not one day strike that Bombassa paddle-boy when he touched it? And did he not open it at night alone in the secret of his tent?"

The hashish had all burned from the cigarette. O'Neil flipped it across the dark water. It struck with a little, sputtering hiss. The nearby drums had stopped, and one was beating in the far distance.

"How do you know what he did in the secret of his tent?"

Bobolongonga whispered, "Nkoi-Gomed, he saw."

It was no secret to O'Neil that those Nebrebs eavesdropped every chance they got.

"Send him down."

"Yes, Master."

THE moon was rising, silhouetting the bokongu trees. The river commenced slap-slapping in little waves, indicating that crocs were on the move. Two nights before he'd killed a croc less than twenty paces from his tent. He instinctively felt for his Mauser, lifted it, feeling a whisper of bare feet on the twig-strewn path and he turned as a tall Nebreb approached.

The native wore a sarong of cotton that had once been a bright red-brindle, but swamp muck and sweat had turned it almost dark as his skin. Around his neck a string of cowrie shells made white reflection. He stopped a half-dozen steps away and made the Moslem sign. He was not a Moslem, of course. He made the sign without knowing what it meant, merely because he feared this *bondele* of the hook-arm and the Moslem sign more than any other indicated reverence.

"Nkoi-Gomed!" O'Neil cried, assuming the stiff formality a white man should always use in dealing with a native, "Nkoi-Gomed, you have seen inside the Bonde-Doktor's carry-all bag?"

The black weaved his head back and forth and rolled his eyes in an exaggerated sign of negation. "Nkoi-Gomed good boy, Nkoi——"

"You saw inside his carry-all bag. The Bonde-Doktor was inside his tent with the candle lighted and you were belly-

down like a snake peeping through the seams. You were on one knee behind, peeping through the insect screen." He watched Nkoi's face, guessing when he hit on the truth. "That was it!—you were peeping through the insect screen."

Nkoi-Gomed exhaled through flattened nostrils.

"What did you see? What did the Bonde-Doktor have in his carry-all bag?"

"I saw—only face. A woman. *Bonde-mama*. Pressed flat, so."

"What else?"

"Nothing, *Bwana*. Only spirit face, pressed flat."

"A woman's picture?"

"Me don' know *bondele* word——"

"Young *mama*?"

He nodded with a vehemence that set his copper earrings swinging like twin pendulums. O'Neil gestured, indicating he was finished.

II

ARMLESS O'NEIL watched until the native was out of sight, then the hard lines of his face softened in a lopsided grin. *Spirit face pressed flat!* The Doc had probably been carrying a snapshot of his wife or daughter, and to the native it was a ghost-image ironed out and preserved through connivance with a sorcerer.

The fire had died, save for a few coals deep beneath ash when he went back to camp. Natives crouched in the darkness. They were almost invisible. Only the shine of cowie shell or metal leg band here and there. They watched him. He could sense their eyes, the tension of their bodies.

He didn't speak. He moved around the shadow edge of the little clearing until a rectangle of deeper blackness marked the position of his tent. There he drew up, hand on the round butt of his Mauser.

It was not that he expected to be ambushed. It was just that those Nebrebs feared *him*, and they feared those drums out in the night, and men caught between two fears are dangerous. Dangerous as mambas, and as unpredictable.

Night odors touched his nostrils. Swamp and jungle smells of fermentation and de-

cay. The odor of false-jasmine growing from a thousand rotted tree trunks. It was his sense of smell rather than instinct, or sight, or hearing that told him he was safe. A native has a way of making himself known to the white man's nostrils because of the rancid anointing oils he likes to use.

He opened the fly of his tent and went inside. It seemed close and hot after the night coolness. He moved his cot to a new position and lay on its stretched canvas, staring at the black ceiling overhead. No drums. Once in a while he heard the clink of arm or leg bands as a sentry moved around. He dozed.

The hashish was still in him, and it maintained its effect for about four hours. Then he awoke with a burning in his throat. He reached, found his canteen, drank. The water, boiled the evening before, was still warm, filled with the musty taste of dead infusoria.

He went outside. From the darkness he could hear the regular snoring of Bobolongonga. No movement, and he knew that the Nebrebs were gone. It was no surprise.

He walked across the clearing, Mauser unholstered, swinging at his side. The packages were stacked as they had been, so apparently little had been taken. He stopped and cursed—not the natives but things in general, himself, Doc Chowan, and all the string of circumstances that had placed him there, in that sinkhole jungle with the rains coming on, instead of on the cool verandah of the Metropole Hotel in Elizabethville, with an ice-filled sundowner in his hand and the clean sweep of the Avenue l'Etoile lying below him.

O'Neil went back to his tent. He spoke, and Bobolongonga crawled out, blinking bits of thatch from his eyelashes.

"They run out on us," O'Neil said.

"*Ai-ai-Allah!* Those unbelievers. We will follow them and strangle the breath from their infidel bodies."

O'Neil showed his teeth in a hard grin.

"No. We'll keep following Doc up-river. There's supposed to be a pigmy bridge up there, if the Arab slave traders told the truth. Maybe Doc crossed it. I'd like to find out."

THEY started shortly before sunrise, leaving all but about sixty kilos of their supplies behind. O'Neil walked in the lead, carrying his duffel, a rifle, and two shoulder belts heavy with cartridges; Bobolongonga was at his heels, showing no concern at a double packet consisting of provisions and O'Neil's uniform can.

For hours the path tunnelled in a fairly straight line through jungle. It was a narrow path, scarcely wide enough for two men to pass, but it was extremely old, worn smooth and hard by the naked feet of a thousand years.

The heat of mid-morning was settling like a damp blanket close to the earth before they glimpsed more than a few stray shafts of sunlight. The footpath widened, and there were some long, narrow clearings with the sun stabbing down, white hot and blinding.

The clearings lay one after another, deep in elephant grass and orchilla, for a distance of six or seven kilometers, then the trail ran down to swampy ground where saplings had been laid end to end forming a rude footway.

Siesta, and the drums stopped beating. Bobolongonga snored, but O'Neil, after his white man's manner, merely dozed, lighting one Khartoum cigarette after another, waiting for the afternoon's worst heat to pass.

On again, across swamp, across a hill-shoulder of ground, then back to the river which was narrower now, flowing between white clay banks.

A message drum was thud-thudding from directly across the river and O'Neil stopped to listen. He could tell by Bobolongonga's eyes that he was getting apprehensive again.

"Drums, hell! Africa is filled with drums. I've had them follow me half the way across Uganda and never one sight of them, or one arrow out of the bush."

"But not the drums of the Meeyada!"

"Meeyada, Mengbattu, Azande—the worst is the best. Look at Buckner. He lived twenty years among head-hunters and died one kilo out of Coquilhatville from a Bakele's spear. A peaceful old Bakele that got hopped up on voodoo and maybe some sugar-palm wine. I dare say we'll

walk out of here just like we've walked out of places before. And maybe I'll drag that Doc Chowan with me. Or at least his wallet."

"Remember what the wise men of thy country sayeth, O Bwana, *draw not to the straight that is inside.*"

"Show me the dough and I'll draw to an inside straight or anything else. Maybe this is it, Bobo my lad. A stake so damned big I'll get all the way to Chicago with it."

They traveled a hill country through massive rain-forest. Then there were clearings patterned by tiny millet fields. A tiny black man swung agile as a 'gila monkey from a branch and came rapidly hand over hand down a cable-stiff vine, lighted on the footpath facing them, and backed away, grinning, chattering in a tongue O'Neil could not understand. He was a pigmy, scarcely three and a half feet tall.

"*Kay-ah-tah!*" O'Neil said in the upper Congo Jargon. "*Baminga. Bonde-baminga.*"

"*Baminga!*" the pigmy chattered back, nodding violently, grinning with his mouth open so he revealed his teeth, brown-black from chewing native betel. "*Bonde give machete. Bonde give copper.*"

O'Neil gave him nothing, but asked to be taken to his chief.

The chief was already coming to meet him. He was an officious, pot-bellied little fellow reeking from *bowane* oil. With sign language jargon and gifts of trinkets and wire O'Neil bargained for information, learning that the white man had crossed to the far shore about three evenings before. O'Neil asked about the Meeyada villages, but the chief knew nothing. It was probable he'd never ventured more than a dozen kilometers away from his village in all his lifetime.

The bridge consisted of a series of pontoons connecting a number of islands that broke the river at that point. Eleven pigmies formed a guard of honor until they were a kilo deep in the bush at the far side, and from there O'Neil and Bobolongonga went on alone, followed again by the irregular tongue of the message drums.

"The drums have the eyes of leopards, Master."

O'NEIL nodded. They had seen no humans other than their own porters and those pygmies during the past twenty-four hours, and yet eyes had followed them through every kilometer of jungle—the eyes of natives who were as adept at concealing themselves as was the tiniest *mboloko* antelope.

In former years those unseen eyes had troubled O'Neil so that sometimes he imagined men watching him even in the darkness of his own tent, but now, after his years along the black belt, it was something he'd come to accept, like quinine, and insects, and second-grade *schnapps*.

There was a late afternoon deluge leaving the jungle steaming hot with a hint of purple mist in the air. At night they camped between the banks of a little, steep-sided ravine.

O'Neil directed Bobolongonga as he built a bed of thatch with a mosquito net stretched over it, and then as the velvet shadows crept in from the ravine's jungle sides he squatted on his heels chopping twigs in half with his hook, feeding them one by one into a tiny bush fire.

A bush arched over his head with beads of rain still hanging to its leaves. Something touched the bush, and he heard the patter of dislodged drops around him. He did not move. There was no change in his expression. Only a slight narrowing of his eyes. He kept adding the twigs, watching them burst into flame. Then an odor came to him—the musty mixture of sweat, hippo fat and palm oil.

He rubbed dirt from his hand and turned quite casually. He half rose, then with a sudden movement, he flung himself headlong, his right arm darting far beneath the bush.

There was a moment of struggle, then he came back, dragging a native by the throat.

The native was wiry and tough, but he was no match for O'Neil's strength. O'Neil rammed him hard against the ground and held him at the length of his arm while his struggles diminished to a clawing futility. Then he held him a few seconds longer for good measure.

He let go and stepped back. Effort had

brought perspiration to his face. He mopped it away with the sleeve of his tan shirt. The native was wheezing for breath, fighting his way to a sitting position. His eyes wandered and came to rest on O'Neil.

"Well, what in the hell were you looking for?"

The native swung his head back and forth. He didn't understand the words, and O'Neil hadn't expected him to. Bobolongonga came crawling from the surrounding orchilla weed, pointing his Mas rifle.

"Infidel eater of pork! Can thou not answer the white *bwana* when he asks questions?"

The native started to rise, but when he saw the rifle coming he fell on his back and rocked from elbow to elbow, dragging himself across the ground.

"Put the gun away," O'Neil growled. He'd stopped looking at the native. His eyes wandered the blackness surrounding the camp. "Put it away before you get an arrow through you. He didn't come alone."

Bobolongonga slowly lowered the rifle. Both men were listening. The silence had a taut quality. Somewhere, more droplets of moisture were pattering. There was movement—small, disconnected bits of movement that a person could *feel* rather than hear.

A MAN appeared, quite suddenly, as though he'd risen from nowhere. A black man, so skinny he seemed to be all bones, and tendons, and loose skin covered by tribal welts. Fire reflected from his oiled body, and from the iron point of his *assagai* spear. He crouched forward with the spear out and level with his shoulder. He could have hurled it from that position, but O'Neil was sure he didn't intend to.

"*Baminga*. Friend. You come." O'Neil spoke in an easy voice. He sounded almost amused.

The native came forward, feeling his way carefully as though he expected the earth to give away in a deadfall before him. Bobolongonga still held the Mas rifle. When he seemed to be out of the native's

vision, he commenced working his way backward into the bush.

"No, Bobo," O'Neil said. "You'll get an *assagai* through you. Or through me. That'd be worse."

Bobolongonga stopped, then he leaped suddenly and let the rifle clatter to the earth. He whirled around and watched as another native came in sight with a needle-sharp *assagai* thrust far forward.

"Swine! Infidel! Essence of camel's dung!" He kept naming the man things and rubbing the place beneath his left shoulder blade where the *assagai* had drawn blood.

Other *assagai* men came into view, from the brush, down steep walls of the ravine. O'Neil counted eleven. They closed in, making an irregular circle with their pointed spears. A drum started, so close one could feel the concussion of it striking his chest.

O'Neil laughed and said, "Well I'll be damned!" They'd done it all soundlessly, even to carrying that tree-trunk drum on their shoulders.

The first *assagai* man, evidently their leader, came forward a few more sliding steps, said something, and gave the Moslem salute. Like the Nebreb the night before, he did it as a sign of reverence. O'Neil would have been no more surprised if he'd got down and kissed the toes of his *veldtschoen*.

O'Neil acknowledged the salute without returning it. Long ago he'd learned the effectiveness of arrogance in dealing with natives. He turned, batted one of the closer *assagais* from his way with a swing of his hook and walked to the fire where the water was boiling. He seated himself crosslegged and with great deliberation stirred up a cup of extract coffee.

"Well, out with it!" he barked. "What do you want?"

The native looked at him blandly.

"See if you can talk to him," O'Neil said to Bobolongonga.

Bobolongonga started with the Katanga and worked his way up through the Bafuta and Swihili tongues. Finally, using a combination of sign language and the East Soudan dialects, he learned that they had come to take the Hook-Arm *bondele* and

his "box of the *avodoun*" to the Meeeyada villages.

"Box of the *avodoun*?" O'Neil barked. "Box of magic?"

The native pointed a long, bony forefinger at the uniform can.

The uniform can was a metal box the size of a small trunk, aluminum painted, fitted with a padlock, fairly moisture-proof. In it O'Neil was accustomed to carrying his assorted valuables—an extra pistol, his watch, medicines, whisky.

"Ask what he wants of it."

Bobolongonga put the question, but the native would not elaborate. He simply rocked his head from side to side and repeated the Moslem salute. He'd come to escort O'Neil and his "box of the *avodoun*" to Meeeyada villages—with the *assagais* pointed upward like a guard of honor if O'Neil wished to go willingly, or pointed at his back if he didn't.

O'Neil recognized the facts of the situation as he sat crosslegged, blowing across his cup of bitter coffee. He grinned and waved his hook in a careless manner,

"Tell 'em I'll be honored to go. Anywhere."

III

THE MEEYADA TRIBESMEN were there, squatting with *assagai* spears when O'Neil crawled in his bed of thatch, and they were still there revealed by early dawn glow when he awoke.

"Ever sleep?" he growled.

They watched him with staring wonder as he stripped and stood with his stump arm clasped overhead while Bobolongonga poured water over his head and rubbed him dry with dry grass leaves.

"Ask about Doc Chowan," he said to Bobolongonga.

Bobolongonga had asked about him before, but now he tried again. If the Meeeyada knew anything, they gave no indication. Breakfast, then the footpath again, through jungle.

At siesta time they met a second group of *assagai* men. With them were four slaves and a *tepoi*.

The *tepoi* was an ornate affair of carved okume wood and a bark-cloth canopy not

exactly suited to jungle travel. It was placed on the ground, and O'Neil, without asking a question, got inside, removed his *veldtschoen* and sun helmet, and lay back in the reclining chair. Lulled by the *tepoi's* gentle rocking he rode through the close heat of afternoon.

Finally he sat up and called for the canteen. More natives had met them while he dozed. The procession, counting a dozen shoulder-branded slaves, now numbered about sixty-five.

He lighted a cigarette, leaned back in the *tepoi*, and if native eyes hadn't been following him every second, he'd have laughed.

Bobolongonga had slung the canteen over his shoulder and was walking with his green *Mecca-turban* just level with the *tepoi*.

"How's the walking down there?" O'Neil asked.

"My feet have been eaten by chiggers," the black man rumbled, "and they burn like the fires of the damned. But I will suffer without complaint, O Master, for one day I will live again in the Prophet's paradise, and there it will be I who will ride in the *tepoi* with twelve maidens of musk, while barefoot with their tongues dripping dust fifty Christians will carry me."

Areas of grassland were breaking the jungle. Along one hillside, coffee trees had been set out in rows, their waxy looking leaves reflecting sun. Farther on he saw terraced millet fields, and along lower ground some hummocky patches of casava.

Drums were beating ahead, around a turn in the footpath. Not message drums now. He recognized the deep boom of hippo and elephant hide, then the lighter tom-toms, and the clink of a *balafon*. He sat up then, straightened his clothes, assumed a posture of erect arrogance with the Mauser pulled around to view on one side and his hook arm on the other. Thus, staring straight ahead, he was carried down the long street of the village.

The village was a large one—he guessed it at something more than two hundred huts. They stood in a double row, each

hut circular in shape, the smaller ones simple cone-shaped structures of poles and thatch, the larger ones having lower walls of sun-baked brick with more truncated cones above. At the far end of the village was an area of beaten dirt, black from the remnants of a thousand ceremonial fires, and in a half-circle around it some extensive triple huts of brick and wood.

Tom-tom players, mostly *girots* with shaved heads and white tattoo marks of their caste, squatted and beat their instruments with the palms of their hands while a low wailing of fetish priests rose and fell from inside one of the huts. The *assagai* men stopped just outside the dancing circle, but O'Neil was carried on, and the *tepoi* was finally lowered to earth facing the door to the largest hut. A fetisher, masked grotesquely to represent the Antelope God, advanced to meet him.

O'Neil then crawled from beneath the canopy, and stood with his face toward the fetisher but with his eyes roving the huts beyond.

Some heads no larger than monkey's had been mounted on bamboo poles and stood in a double row before one of the smaller huts. They were excellent examples of the native embalmer's art—human heads shrunk by wood acid and hot sand, and preserved against the ravages of the climate by the repeated application of copal solution. Something resembling a smile touched O'Neil's lips. It would be a surprise to see someone there that he knew. Doc Chowan for example. But there hadn't been time to take care of Doc if he'd gone that way. One of those head-shrinking jobs takes anywhere from three to six weeks.

A VOICE emerged from the depths of the mask and was speaking to him in the unintelligible Meeyada language. O'Neil made a sign showing he did not understand. An arm then appeared from the region of the mask's right eye, pointing out the uniform can still balanced atop Bobolongonga's head.

"Bring it along," O'Neil said. "Maybe now we'll find out what the hell this whole thing's about."

The fetisher walked away, struggling

under the load of his mask, leading them through the door of the largest hut.

There'd been breeze blowing down from the hill country that rolled away toward the Rowenzori Ridge, but the series of little, low-ceilinged rooms that formed the entrance were stifling, filled with the dusty stench of *gri-gri* charms and native sandlewood incense.

It was dark for a while, then O'Neil found himself in the twilight of a big room.

Somewhere during the intricate process of entering, the fetisher had disappeared. O'Neil stopped and looked around. The room was half-circular with bamboo shuttered windows on two sides. There were no furnishings except a couch made of thickly stacked bark cloth. A sofa pillow lay on the couch. He stepped over to look at it.

Generations of grime and anointing oil had blackened the pillow until it was slick and cacao-brown, but he could still make out the words, "*Quai di Midi, Souvenir de Riveria.*" It was anybody's guess how that slum souvenir pillow got to be the *piece de honneur* on a cannibal chieftain's couch.

His eyes were getting used to the dimness, and he now saw that what he'd taken to be a wall cutting the room in half was actually a screen of native cotton floss, woven loosely and turned amber-translucent by impregnation with resin gum. He glimpsed movement on the other side of the screen. The silhouette of someone he first took to be a boy. Then he saw the contour of young breasts and realized it was a girl, young and sinuously graceful.

She walked past, less than ten feet away, beyond the screen. He had only a vague impression of her features, but he knew she wasn't a Meeyada. She was Egyptian, Arabian, or perhaps even a Fulbe, but not negroid.

He stood still not breathing, as though for fear the slightest move would put her to flight. She climbed a couple of steps and sat down in a chair, or a high palm-mat stool. Only her shadow was visible then. A slave woman came in, carrying an earthen vessel on one shoulder. She

lowered it, got down on one knee, poured liquid in a bronze cup, handed it to him. He took the cup and lifted it to his lips without moving his eyes from the girl beyond the screen.

It was an *arrack*, or sugar-palm wine, cool from evaporation, sweet and holding the tingle of fermentation. He drank, tossed the heel away, and turned to face the shuffle of feet coming from an unseen passageway.

A drape was lifted and four big Bantu natives with slave brands on their shoulders came inside, carrying a litter with an emaciated man propped up on it.

THE man was a native, but obviously not one of the Meeyada. His forehead bulged too high, and there was a pointed, South-Saharah jut to his lower face. Even before seeing his scars O'Neil knew he was a Niam from the Soudan country to the north-west.

O'Neil waited until they brought the litter over, lifted him off, and placed him with his back against the sofa pillow on the couch.

"Chief!" he said in the Niam dialect. He waved his hook arm as sign of identification. "You have brought me far."

The native lifted a skinny hand. It was heavy with brass rings, and took all his effort. He smiled at the familiar sound of his people's dialect, showing file-pointed teeth. "No chief. Fetish. Leopard fetish. You, *bondele*—you must laugh that fetisher bring you here and ask for medicines."

O'Neil didn't laugh. He drew out two cigarettes, lighted them, and placed one of them between the fetisher's lips. The fetisher relaxed, inhaling the tobacco and hashish deeply, smiling with the outside corners of his mouth. "Already the charm of the *bondele* is working!"

"Don't let that *junk* fool you. Get too much of it and your mouth will taste like the bottom of the wine barrel next morning. How did you know about me?"

"Me Bombura." He meant that was his name. "Me, Bombura, long ago heard of a hook-arm white man who had pellets that killed fever inside his shiny uniform box. Me Bombura hear from lips of Tulu

Chieftain at Badaville how you cured him of the wasting fever. Was it not so?"

Three or four years ago O'Neil had left a handful of sulfa tablets with some village headman in that grass-hut town of Badaville, but he hadn't stayed to learn whether they'd cured him or killed him. It's always an even bet that a black will take them all at once.

He said, "And now you'd like some of the same?"

"I have brought you here that I may live."

"You still haven't told me how you knew where to find me."

"Our drums——"

"Your drums, and a white man that got here a couple of days ago." O'Neil looked at him through the smoke of his cigarette. "Isn't that so, Bombura?"

The native's shrunken face showed nothing.

"Where is he, that other white man?"

Bombura whispered, "I will ask the eye of the leopard. But maybe you mean trader. Bonde-trader Warzeka in mud hut? Perhaps——"

"I'm not talking about any trader. I'm talking about my friend-bondele, good old double-crossing Doc. You dragged him out of that tent back on the Dormura, didn't you?"

"No. No."

"All right then, he came here on his own. That's how you found out I was in the country." He raised his voice, and there was a raw edge on it when he shouted, "Isn't it?"

"The eyes of the Hook-Armed one see far," Bombura whispered around his cigarette. "I have the wasting fever. The Hook-Armed one must not be angry for Bombura bringing here. I would live. And when my fever is gone, then will I tell you of other bondele."

"And what he came here for?"

"Even that."

Bombura had been dragging on the cigarette continually, and already it was down so it burned his lips. O'Neil took it, and stamped it on the green palm matting.

"And the girl on the other side of that screen? How about her if I burn away

the devil of fever? Will you tell me about her?"

Bombura had no resistance in him. He closed his eyes and whispered, "There will be no secrets from *Bwana m'kubwa Hook-Arm*. No secrets."

IV

O'NEIL WAS NO DOCTOR, BUT he'd looked at a great deal of tropical fever and he recognized this as the Vishumbi, or goat-fever as it was known up in Niam where often entire villages were stricken after drinking the milk of infected goats. The disease showed itself in recurrent attacks of fairly high fever over a period of about six months. If the attacks kept coming after that time it was bad, and Bombura, by the looks of him, had been suffering for several years. Without something to burn it out of him he'd do well to last through the present rainy season.

O'Neil unsnapped the padlock of his uniform can, found a large bottle of sulfa-pyridine tablets, dissolved one in a full cup of *arrack* and held it to Bombura's lips. He would return with others at intervals as the night went on.

The sun was dropping from sight, silhouetting the surrounding nut palms against the flaming violet of evening mists when he went outside. An *assagai*-man led him to a hut, larger than the others, just constructed and filled with the odors of fresh palm-thatch and bamboo. A heap of dry grass had been left for his bed. He told Bobolongonga to stretch his mosquito net, and went outside.

Bombura had mentioned a white trader by the name of Warzeka. O'Neil caught sight of his place, the common, circular building of mud and thatch, standing inside a tiny compound. O'Neil laughed—and spat as though it left a bad taste on his tongue. In the name of *Allah!*—— was there no hole of the jungle so deep that some trader wouldn't hunt it out to peddle iron arrowheads and ten-franc machetes?

A path led to the store across a half-kilometer of abandoned cassava patch. A man had appeared beneath the low-

slung front porch and was watching with eyes shaded under a beefy forearm.

"Warzeka?" O'Neil asked.

"Sure. Warzeka." He was a massive man with a voice that was heavy and oily to match his appearance. He shuffled down the three steps from his porch with a dragging slap-slap of laceless tennis shoes. Aside from the shoes, his only garments were shirt and pants. The shirt had no buttons and it made no pretense of covering his vast chest and belly. His pants kept sliding down as he walked, and he kept hitching them up. Despite heat, and miasma, and poor *schnapps* there was still muscle underlying his flabbiness.

He stopped at a distance of a dozen steps and let a smile find its way across his gross face.

"O'Neil? Sure, O'Neil of the hook arm. Always have I heard of O'Neil of the hook arm. *Armless O'Neil*. So. For eight years have I sat here, in this heat, these flies, waiting for the white visitor to come and tell me I am not dead, and now there is one. *Armless O'Neil*. So it would be you. Yah."

He laughed, shaking the wattles at the sides of his face and expending the air in his lungs so he had to wheeze to get it back. The effort had produced perspiration that glistened in the last sun. He was a European, a Slav by his name, but he spoke with the peculiar assortment of accents that indicated he'd spent many years in the tropics.

They shook hands. "Eight years and no white man." O'Neil said. It seemed that Warzeka had made too much a point of telling that. "You're positive of that, Warzeka?"

"Yah I am sure of it!" He said the words with sudden truculence. "What do you mean?"

O'Neil met his eyes and there was a second or two of silence. "You steam up easy, don't you?"

WARZEKA took a deep breath and relaxed. He shrugged his shoulders to indicate it was of no consequence. He grinned, showing his coffee-brown teeth. "It was only that I thought you meant—Ach—nothing. Eight years, it is true,

O'Neil. Eight years of rain and heat, with no men except these black swine around me. Maybe sometime an Arab, or a Hindu with his pack of red cotton, trying to trade the ivory away from me. But these I drive away with a rifle. You are the *first* white man. So, come inside. For you I will open a bottle. Something called *schnapps*." He chuckled, "So long without I have forgotten the word. Come. I have been saving it too long."

Warzeka turned and shuffled back along the cobblestone path, careful never to quite lift his feet for fear the tennis shoes would fall off. His trousers, wrinkled and sweaty, exposed the calves of his legs, showing skin that was pitted and crisscrossed by knife scars from the uncounted leeches he'd cut away during the rainy seasons.

"Leeches bother you here?" O'Neil asked.

"Hah, leeches! Thick on every bush during the rains. The native they do not touch. Day after day without a leech, the black man. But a white—his blood tastes good. Your Warzeka tastes good. But it will not always be so. No. Someday will your Warzeka leave this fever-hole of the rains. Someday will he go back with money in his pockets. To Bohemia. To Prague. If those swine the Russians, the Americans leave anything of my poor country."

O'Neil followed him inside. The house had been built on piles, and it gave underfoot with a weaving motion as they walked. Warzeka crossed the dim twilight of the room, opened a chest, and commenced pawing inside.

O'Neil sat down in a rattan chair and spread out his legs. The room was cool from evening draught. He laid his head back, closed his eyes. Salvoda was blooming with the first rains, and its heavy, clovelike perfume mixed with the stale storeroom smells of the house—the rancid palm nuts, the musty, animal odor that came from stacked ivory.

He was thinking about Warzeka making his stake, heading back to Prague. It jolted him a little that the man would have the same ambition he did—with the slight substitution of Prague for Chicago. White

men always talked the same, but the tropics were like some sporozoa that get laid in the blood where they keep gnawing away at a man's will until he lacks that final determination that makes the difference between wanting and doing, until finally he ends up a good, solid two feet underground with a heap of empty *schnapps* bottles for a headstone.

O'Neil laughed, and Warzeka lifted himself quickly, bringing a square, dark bottle with him.

"Why do you laugh?"

"It's nothing."

"You think perhaps my *schnapps* is not good? You——"

"In the tropics, all *schnapps* is good."

"Ho. Oh-ho-ho! Joke is good. Yah."

With considerable care he inserted a corkscrew and opened the bottle.

O'Neil said, "The trade must be good that you could save enough here to retire in Europe."

"Trade is poor. Always poor at these ends of the jungle left by *le Compagnie du Belge* for the independent trader." He saw the direction of O'Neil's gaze and said, "You are looking at my scrivelo. Those tusks of billiard ball ivory. You are thinking perhaps I have traded for all that since my safari last dry season? Ha! Would it were so, Hook-Arm! Eight years I have spent gathering it. Day after day in this hut, through rains, through harmattan with the yellow dust of Sahara plugging my nose. Eight years, trading arrowheads, machetes, perhaps a few pinches of poison."

He caught the sharp glance of O'Neil's eyes and nodded, shaking his wattles, "Yah, poison. Why not? If I do not sell them cyanide, then they make it of cobra venom. With my poison they die more quickly, but one dead man is no more dead than another. Eight years for that heap of ivory, those few bags of copal gum, perhaps a little bort-diamond abrasive worth five pounds-sterling the karat. Two-three years more. Then the big safari. Ho-No!——your Warzeka will not sell to the *Compagnie*! Those blood-suckers! I will travel north, along old slave trail, to Mongalla, to railroad at El Obied. To the auction at Cairo." He

stopped and peered over at O'Neil. "Why do you smile?"

"I was thinking you were like Van Dorp. Did you ever know him?"

Warzeka shook his head slowly.

"He was a Dutchman on one of those Crown Concessions south of Coquilhatville. Latex. He talked about the big stake, about Druten on the Waal. And he made it, a bucketful of money when the war was on and they were paying for rubber like diamonds. So he sold out and went back. To Holland. It was winter and he almost died of the ague. He didn't have blood in his veins. Neither do you, Warzeka. All you have left is a mixture of *schnapps* and quinine with a hybrid infusoria floating around in it in place of corpuscles. A man like that has no metabolism left. Take him away from heat and humidity and he dies." O'Neil seemed to think all this was highly humorous. He laughed from one side of his mouth, lifted a crockery cup half filled with *schnapps*, and downed it.

Warzeka was bending over the rough plank table. "He died?"

"No. Not the last I heard. He built himself a hothouse and heated it with live steam. Not those radiator things——real steam. And then to feel at home, he sent back to Boma and brought up some boole trees, and bokongus, and sucker vines, and orchids. And there he sits, staying alive, in heat and damp worse than rainy season in Lokombo."

"I will live!" Warzeka cried, rearing to his feet and driving the flat of his hand to the tabletop. The *schnapps* jumped and O'Neil reached to keep it from rolling off the table. "In Prague, I will live. Hear me, you Yankee devil, I will sit at a table in Prague, and I will eat off a white cloth. And I will look at women. White women with *clothes* on."

The effort left Warzeka winded. He swabbed perspiration off the vast expanse of his face, picked up the cup of *schnapps*, and let it flow down his throat. He might as well have been drinking water.

There was a minute or two of silence. Very softly, fetish drums were thum-thumming from the village. The jungle was close outside, and darkness seemed to

be a thing of substance, pressing in around the trade store. At last Warzeka spoke, "You were joking about the Dutchman."

O'Neil grinned and drew out a cigarette, got a match from his chemi-dry box, lighted it. The flame seemed bright after the long darkness. He held the match for a while, dropped it on the floor, reached with his toe to put it out. He hesitated a second. The flame hung for a while, rising and falling, lighting a dirt-clotted crack between the boards. A half-burned match stub lay there—a bright red, pressed-paper match. One of the new matches specially manufactured for the tropics, supposedly eliminating the need of an air-tight box. Doc Chowan had been carrying them.

So his first hunch had been right. Doc had been there inside that room.

O'Neil inhaled and talked cigarette smoke from his lungs, "Isn't there something in this village worth a hell of a lot more than ivory?"

He said it to get a rise from Warzeka. The result was sudden and surprising.

WARZEKA rammed the table with stomach in getting up. Light of the match had made it seem more dark than before. He hunched across the table, peering in O'Neil's face. There was nothing he could read there, of course. O'Neil was saturnine and half-smiling as always.

"So." He'd started to say more, but he'd checked himself. "For that you have come." His eyes had a quick, jackal expression in the midst of his fat face. "Perhaps for the Eye of the Leopard? Of this you have heard?"

O'Neil had heard of it about one hour before in his conversation with old Bom-buro. Now it had cropped up again.

As if he didn't care, O'Neil asked,

"What is the Eye of the Leopard?"

"How would your Warzeka know? These fetishers! This witchcraft! I do not go near it. I do not challenge the beasts that would eat men's souls."

"Then you don't know what is is."

"No."

"And you've seen no other white men in eight years."

Something in O'Neil's tone made him

hesitate. He took a step backward before answering, "No."

"Warzeka, you're a liar."

He said it without changing the level of his voice, and that seemed only to put a worse edge to the words. Anger spread itself slowly across the man's face. His mouth was open, and in the half-light, O'Neil had already felt the slight tremble teeth. He backed up one step, two. His eyes moved. He was trying to see inside the storeroom without moving his head. Someone was in there. A heavy man. O'Neil had already felt the slight tremble as he crossed the suspended floor.

The wall brought Warzeka to a stop. There was an old-time Lebel rifle leaning at long reach from his left hand. A shelf was on the other side heaped with a clutter of trade goods, and what looked like a coiled, rhino whip at the near edge.

O'Neil slouched a little more to one side in the chair, a posture that caused the Mauser to swing a trifle away from his right hip.

Finally, words came thickly from Warzeka's tongue.

"No man call Warzeka a liar. No man—"

"How did he happen to come *here*?"

"Who?"

"The Doc. The white man. How did he happen to be *here*, in this house?"

"I have said—"

"And I said you were a liar." O'Neil sounded a trifle weary as he repeated, "Why did the Doc come *here*?"

Warzeka decided to smile. His lips looked wet, and thick, and gross. "You sound so sure, Herr Yankee. How can you be so sure he was *here*?"

"I took a course in the *avodoun*. I read minds. I have a gourd and twelve grains of devil-corn in my pocket. And besides, I saw one of his matches on the floor."

Warzeka thought it over. He chuckled. The laugh mounted by degrees, and came in a series of separate bursts from his throat. "Ho-ho! Ho-ho-ho! So you have tripped up your poor Warzeka. So he has talked with the *Herr-Doktor* and he has lighted his cigarette in this room. Now cards are on the up and up as you Yankees say. I tell about *Herr-Doktor*, you tell

about what you come to find in this last hole of the jungle."

"Keep talking. How about the Doc?"

"About him—why should you care? Only a fool would have the third share instead of the half. Is it not so? Listen!—for eight years I have lived here, knowing there was something worth more than all my ivory inside that Hut of the Fetish. So close, and yet there was no way, for white man. For *me*. I have asked questions. Of these natives. They tell me nothing. But all the while I have *known*. Now you come. You, Armless O'Neil, soldier of fortune. It must be worth more than all Warzeka's ivory that you come from so far away as Kongolo."

"I asked you about the Doc. You tortured him, didn't you? You went too far and killed him."

"No!"

"You're a liar."

"Twice you have called me liar! Hear me, in this trade-store Warzeka is king! The black tribesmen have willed it so, if I bring them the arrowhead, the poison, that here inside my compound I will be king. With my own slaves the power of life and death. With you, the power of life and death. Do you hear me?"

O'NEIL kept watching him. He seemed slack and indolent with the right hand hanging limp, the backs of his fingers toward the Mauser butt. He was smiling a little. In the half-darkness the glow of his cigarette added ruddiness to the gray light that seeped from outside.

Warzeka's hand moved along the shelf and closed on the coiled rhino whip.

"You hear me?" he roared. "You hear my words that inside this compound I rule as king? So you will talk when I say. You will tell me the secret of that Leopard Voodoo—that Kraal of Darkness. You will tell me why it was worth coming one thousand kilometers upriver from Kongolo."

"The hell with you."

Warzeka moved with a quickness unexpected for one of his bulk. He straightened high, and his back snapped forward. The whip uncoiled with the darting accuracy

of a cobra. It seemed to explode in O'Neil's face, stopping an inch short, leaving his cigarette in shreds.

He had instinctively hurled himself back. The chair would have tipped over with him. He saved himself by twisting to one side, slightly in a crouch. Warzeka had already recoiled the whip.

"Tell me, Yankee!" he bellowed. "Tell me or I will cut the clothes from your back like you were black native."

"The hell with you."

Warzeka started down with the whip again, but as its butt came level with his ear, the Mauser exploded lashing flame across the room. Warzeka spun as though hit, but the bullet had merely ripped close to his hand leaving the whip butt hanging by a narrow shred of leather.

O'Neil had sensed movement in the storeroom but as he fired he was already spinning away. The air whisked beside him. There was a thud and tremble. An *assagai* was driven deep in one of the hardwood supports of the house just back of the tipped-over rattan chair.

He stopped in the partial protection of the table and rested on one knee, the gun not pointed but ready.

He'd momentarily lost sight of Warzeka. Then he saw the man bent over, sucking his hand where the bullet had burned. His eyes were on the Mauser.

"You would not kill me, O'Neil," he said.

"Sure of that?"

"Yah. For there is now at your back a poisoned dart. One wink of Warzeka's eyes and the point would touch you with the tiny sting of death. So you will put the gun away."

O'Neil turned, little by little. There was a skinny, dwarfish black man in the door to the porch. He had a native crossbow with its short length of bamboo tubing aimed. The point of the dart was barely visible. It was coated with something that resembled rough whitewash.

O'Neil moved slowly, like one who had discovered a mamba close by and fears making any sharp movement that would jar the tense trigger of its body.

"All right. I'll put the gun away. Tell him to aim that tube some other direction.

It might slip. You may be 'king' here, Warzeka, but it mightn't be healthy for you to kill me while Bombura over there is waiting for his next sulfa tablet."

V

WARZEKA MOVED AWAY from the wall, got a match, lighted a lamp. The lamp was filled with hippo fat that burned with a high, stinking flame. He carried the lamp over, put it on the table, and sat down across from O'Neil. Only then did he wave his thick fingers in a signal for the spidery black man to lower his crossbow.

Another black, a huge, hunch-shouldered Bantu, plodded in from the storeroom and jerked the *assagai* free. It took all his weight so deep was it driven, and the house trembled as it came loose.

"Strong fellow," O'Neil said.

"Ibulo, yah. Strong but a dull mind. And my other slave—Nikola. Small with the sharp mind of a Mamba. Two of them together make one good man like Warzeka."

The huge Ibulo backed away, examining the point of his *assagai*. The iron was brittle, and a quarter inch of its keen point had snapped off on striking the hardwood pillar. His face, as he looked at it, had a slack, truculent sadness. Old tribal scars welted his neck and shoulders, mixing with an intricate criss-cross of more recent marks—the scars left by years of whip lashes.

"Yours?" O'Neil asked.

"What? Oh, the back. The whip marks. Sometimes, Herr Yankee, the white man must prove his superiority to the native, yah?"

"And some dark evening he'll put that *assagai* through you."

Warzeka's eyes narrowed. He poured more *schnapps*. "You do not need to worry about your Warzeka. You would perhaps have Warzeka believe that the black man would drive the *assagai* through his heart while he was sitting in his glass house heated by live steam." Warzeka laughed in a series of bursts, shaking his wattles. "Glass house in Prague, yah."

He was silent then. For a period of five

or six minutes the white men sat across the table from each other, and there were no sounds except the sounds of the jungle, and at the far side of the room, the scrape-scape as Ibulo worked a whetstone across the *assagai* point.

The oil flame, rising and falling with a flutter of black smoke at its crest reflected off the broad side of Warzeka's face. O'Neil knew he was listening to the whetstone. His right hand, by imperceptible degrees, was tightening on the rhino whip.

Suddenly, without warning, Warzeka reared back to his feet, turned, and swung the whip. The lash roared air and cut the skin across Ibulo's shoulders. The black man, trying at the last instant to get away, tripped and half fell. The *assagai* was clutched crosswise of his body. Warzeka reared back and let the whip come again. This time its lash was deflected from Ibulo's upflung right forearm and struck across the crown of his round, clipped skull.

Warzeka shouted, "So you would maybe sharpen spear for me? You have heard the words of the hook-arm, and you think perhaps it would be good idea to run Warzeka through like wart-hog? You hear me!—do you ever lift spear against Warzeka he will hang you by heels and skin you alive with whip. And after the whip he will hang you in the afternoon sun until you are cooked. You hear me, Ibulo?"

It was doubtful whether Ibulo got the meaning of anything Warzeka said. He crouched back until the wall stopped him and waited there until Warzeka, wheezing from effort, coiled the whip and sat back down.

O'Neil had watched it all through the thin smoke of his cigarette. He laughed with a hard jerk of his shoulders, poured more *schnapps*. Warzeka spoke,

"Damn you, O'Neil. Damn you for putting those things in my head. Season after season I have been here, sitting on mine porch, drinking millet beer, trading with those who come, watching my stack of ivory grow. I have been peaceful here. Every day, not fearing my blacks will betray me, dreaming of how I would go back to Prague and live like retired Junker. And now you, with your talk. You with your

stories about glass houses filled with hot steam, your Black Fetish, your *assagai* in the back. This the thanks you give for my good *schnapps*. Damn you, hook-arm white man."

O'Neil gave no sign of hearing him. "Who's the girl in the big hut?" he asked.

"How would I know? And if I did know, would I tell you who come from Kongolo for something you will not say what? There will come a day, perhaps—a day when you will be glad to take Warzeka in partners with you."

O'NEIL squeezed out the coal of his cigarette and left. Skinny Nikola, the dart-gun under his arm, was lurking beneath the deep vine-shadow of the porch. It was dark when he reached the central village street. Cookfires had left a thin, blue layer of smoke suspended in the air. He could see black men and women, naked save for their breechcloths, clustered in deeper darkness between the huts, watching him as he passed. Obviously they'd been instructed not to impede his freedom.

At the big fetish hut, an *assagai* man stopped him. One of the neophyte fetish priests arrived a few seconds later to lead him inside and along what seemed to be a planless assortment of turning passages to a room lighted dimly by a goat-dip candle.

Old Bomburo was stretched on a bark-cloth bed, eyes open, following his approach.

"Old devil fever on the run quick," O'Neil said in his best bedside manner.

Bomburo showed pointed, brown teeth in a grin and watched while O'Neil dissolved a sulfa tablet in weak sugar-palm wine.

"Drink it all," O'Neil said. "Drink plenty wine."

The fetisher was pretty well dried up, and it was a question whether there was enough moisture left in his body to throw off the toxic rebound those pills sometimes have. O'Neil was thinking that the village would be a hot spot for him if the old boy happened to slip off on that one way trip to the *Long Lesa*.

When he was through with the wine, O'Neil said, "Now tell me about other

bondele. *Bonde-Doktor*. How he happen to visit trader Warzeka?"

The question made Bomburo start up from his bed. He checked himself and lay with eyes fastened on O'Neil's face.

"Don't tell me you didn't know he was up there!"

He whispered, "Would you have me kill the trader?"

"No. Why should I?"

Bomburo did not answer.

"Why should I?" O'Neil went on, "What happened to him?"

"When the devil of the fever has left me—then—"

"All right. No cure, no pay. Good enough. But I'll have to see the Eye of the Leopard." He grinned and added, "That my medicine may be strong, I must see the Eye of the Leopard."

It surprised O'Neil when Bomburo gave in on this point without resistance. He lay back, his eyes closed, and waved an arm all loose skin, and bone and tendon. "It will be so. You, *bondele*, have come far with the pills that kill fever. So you shall now see the Eye of the Leopard."

A fetisher had been standing along a shadow-darkened wall. O'Neil had not been aware of his presence until he stepped forward. He took a brass gong from the floor, held it up, and struck it four times. Its clanging dissonance seemed very loud. Others came. Fetishers in masks, with long costumes of raffia, and feathers, and spangled bark-cloth batik. It took them the better part of ten minutes to form a double column. At a signal from their leader they started out, all out of step, a straggling, comic-opera procession.

He was taken through a door, to the darkness of a passageway just wide enough for two abreast. He counted his steps. There was a compass in his pocket and he felt for it, reconsidered. Not knowing his starting point, there was no object in using it. The passage made several turns, then it slowed, and with a fetisher's help, he groped and located a ladderway.

There were sixteen steps, then a long time of walking across a suspended floor. He had no idea the hut was so vast. Finally they stopped.

It was dark. There were mingled odors

of thatch, dust and the putrifaction of dried *gri-gris*. He stretched out his arm. No wall. He was in a room, and he sensed it was a large one.

"Hello!" he said.

HE expected no answer. He merely wished to test the sound of his voice. There was a slight reverberation, enough to tell him that the room was large, lined with seasoned hardwood or plaster rather than the usual weave of palm or bamboo.

Men were walking through the dark. No voices, but he could feel the floor-tremble of their passage.

A native perfume touched his nostrils, and he thought instantly of the girl. It was the same essence of sandalwood and jasmine that had followed her entrance in the lower room that evening.

A fetishier commenced chanting. From somewhere came the muffled sound of tomtoms. Deep, like distant thunder. Huge drums played tremulously by the palms of the hands.

The scent of the perfume became stronger. He had the feeling that she was there, only a long arm's reach away. He took a step despite hands the fetishers laid on him. They hurled him back, and in the midst of movement he was conscious of something whisking in front of him—then the heavy thud and tremble of an *assagai*. Almost like the *assagai* that had winged past and buried itself in wood back at the trade-store. Three or four men had hold of him.

"All right," he said.

They recognized assurance in his tone without understanding his words. The odor had changed now. It was no longer the woman. Somewhere they were burning sandalwood charcoal dusted with spices and dried petals.

He stood quite still. The darkness was beginning to bother him. It seemed to press in, an utter darkness, blacker than the jungle at midnight.

There was a glimmer in front of him, a long, glowing streak. Scarlet. It grew brighter. Other streaks appeared, six of them, radiating from a central point. It became brilliant, and hung with the beauty of pure color, a six-pointed star with elon-

gated points that continually lengthened and shortened.

He tried to turn around. Men were still holding him. He managed to look back despite them. He expected a shaft of light from somewhere behind him. Only the void of blackness. The star could have been near or far, large or small. He had no perspective. It could have been arm's reach away, or the distance of a long room.

It was fading. The points shortened. It became a tiny point of pure red, then it shrank to a colorless point of light and clung glimmering like a single spark to the head of a match before it goes out.

It was gone. The room suddenly seemed hot and breathless, the incense stale, suffocating. The drum had stopped. No chanting now. Fetishers talked in a babble of tongues—the synthetic languages of a half-dozen different fetishes. Hands were pulling him, turning him toward the door.

He drew out his compass. The quivering, luminous hand bounded back and forth as he walked, but the approximate direction was thirty degrees east of north. Four steps took him through the door. He was turned then, and was walking at the mark of 285 degrees, or slightly north of west. He counted eighty-four steps, then a turn headed him south, and there was the ladder to the lower floor.

He managed to stop, despite the urging of the fetishers, and got the next bearing—slightly north of east. After fifty-three steps a turn took him almost directly south, and then, along a curving passage about forty-five degrees east of north. Of this latter there were sixty-seven steps to the main entrance. Even without diagraming it, he knew that the entire course had merely taken him in a wide, wandering circle. The Eye of the Leopard was somewhere above that big, front room.

VI

O'NEIL LAY IN HIS THATCH bed, looking at the mosquito net as it trembled quietly at arm's reach above. He was thinking about the girl. The shadow-glimpse he'd had of her that afternoon kept floating across his memory, but distorted and ridiculous. It was too hot be-

neath the netting, and every time he dozed off his thoughts took on a feverish, night-mare quality.

Finally he tossed back the net, crawled out, dressed. Bobolongonga snored somewhere out in the blackness of the hut. O'Neil reached the door without awakening him.

Night air was cool, filled with jungle odors of rotting wood and dampness. There was a musty sort of exhilaration about it. Moonlight and shadow patterned the street with sharp-edged contrast. Distantly he could see the fetish huts, with a sentry walking wearily back and forth.

O'Neil crossed the street and paused beneath the shadows of some papayas. He lost sight of the sentry, then the man revealed himself as he turned with a little, bluish glint of his *assagai*. It would be easy but pointless to approach without being seen. He glanced at his watch. Still two hours before Bombura's next sulfa pill, but the excuse was perfect. He lighted the cigarette and walked directly to the hut's main door.

The guard had stopped and was blocking the door with his spear held crosswise of his body, but that did not stop him from bowing in the manner of slave to master.

"Bomburo!" O'Neil said, signaling for him to lift the spear. He drew the pills from his pocket and shook them. "Bomburo."

The guard stood his position. O'Neil would have gone in anyway, but the man whirled and pointed the *assagai's* keen point at his heart.

O'Neil laughed and stamped out his cigarette. Men were coming from inside. He could hear the whisper of feet across dry mattings. Two men. They proved to be a masked fetish priest and his neophyte.

"Bomburo!" O'Neil repeated.

The fetisher signaled his understanding and motioned for the neophyte to lift the door drape. He went in first with O'Neil following, and the neophyte a humble ten steps behind.

A faint hint of moonglow found entrance beneath the drape and dimly illuminated the floor for a few steps, then

there was a second drape, and the darkness was complete.

They walked through the series of little rooms. Then there was a turn, and O'Neil knew he was following the winding passageway. He glanced at his compass to make sure. It quivered at the mark of SW. He estimated that twenty-five steps would take him to a fork in the passageway, one arm of which would lead to Bombura, the other, by intricate wanderings and cross-passages to the Eye of the Leopard.

HE WAS at thirty when the branch came. He walked on, following the fetisher for seven steps, then he stopped and flattened himself against the wall. The neophyte walked past, coming so close he was momentarily aware of the heat of his body—then he became a disappearing shuffle of feet along the passage. O'Neil retraced his steps, turned down the other passage, eyes on the compass.

He located the ladderway without difficulty, climbed to the second floor. After sixty steps there were alternate passages open to him. He hadn't expected that. He stood for a few seconds, groping in the darkness. He had to guess one way or the other. He took the right-hand passage, walked for thirteen steps. It took a turn and ended at the door of a room.

THIS was unfamiliar. He started to turn back, but an odor stopped him. The sudden awareness of her presence—it was *her* perfume.

He stood still, back to a woven-bamboo wall. Voices sounded somewhere—not distant, but deadened by many thicknesses of wall. They'd missed him and were looking for him.

The impression of her presence became stronger. He had the feeling that she was standing just off there in the dark, waiting.

"Hello!" he said.

It jolted him when a girl's voice answered an instant later, "Hello."

He started forward—checked himself. He'd never expected her to speak English. English as though it were native to her tongue.

"Hello," he repeated. Then, when she

didn't answer immediately, "Who are you?"

No answer. Her perfume seemed less positive after the first impression. He walked forward, groping. The room seemed to be large. He took seven steps and knew that her voice had come from a shorter distance. He turned and her perfume was strong again, filling the air around him. He reached, expecting to touch her.

"Where are you?"

He'd lost all sense of direction. A man was shouting words in a fetish tongue, but he gave it no thought. Then he heard her. A series of small, rustling sounds. Not footsteps. It was the sound of her smooth skin flowing beneath a bark-cloth robe.

She answered, her voice at his right, more behind than in front of him.

His hand touched the soft-flowing mass of her hair.

She moved, and he thought for a second she was frightened and running away. His hand closed on her shoulder. He seized it hard, the power of his fingers bringing a gasp from her lips. But she still wasn't trying to escape.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Kid, who are you?"

He had the impression of her closeness, though it was too dark to catch even the vaguest shadow. She was breathing rapidly, and through the bark cloth he could feel the excited beat of her heart.

"Girl. I'm Armless O'Neil. American. Yankee. You understand? Who are you?"

"American?" she said.

The word didn't seem to fit her tongue, but she didn't have a foreign accent, either. It was as though she'd learned the word once a long time before, and since then it had lain disused.

"Yes," he said. "I'm an American. I'm O'Neil. My name's O'Neil. I came here to help you. Do you understand? I came here to help you." He paused after each short group of words, waiting for some sign of understanding. "Who are you? How long have you been here?"

"Zelanga," she whispered.

"Zelanga. You mean that's your name—Zelanga?"

"Yes—Zelanga."

"Who brought you here?"

He waited for an answer. She seemed to be standing quite straight, rigid. He could feel the soft warmth of her breath against his throat. He shook her shoulder as though to awaken her.

"Answer! Why are you here?"

She repeated the name, "Zelanga. Name is Zelanga."

There were only a few of his words she could recognize. She should have been afraid of him, coming there in the dark, unexpectedly, but she seemed to be eager, even expecting him. His being a white man made the difference.

Many men were running now, feet close and far, shaking the flimsy structure.

"They're looking for me," he said.

She moved suddenly. She backed away, pulling his shirt sleeve. "Come!" she whispered.

Her voice was tense and urgent. He walked beside her across the padded floor, through a drape of strung beads, up three steps to another room. There she stopped, still holding his sleeve, listening.

"You'd like to come with me, wouldn't you?"

He didn't know whether she understood him or not. It wouldn't baffle him so if he could see her face. He snapped open his matchbox, struck a match.

Its chemical flare was blinding after the long darkness. She let go and inhaled as though to scream, backed away, staring at the flame. She stopped and he had his first real look at her.

SHE was lovely as he'd supposed by his half-impression that afternoon. In her late teens or early twenties. Dark, but not negroid. Her skin was tawny, the muscles beneath perfectly rounded giving her the smooth grace of a leopard. She was Arabian and North-European half and half. He'd seen enough of the mixed bloods to know. She wore no earrings, she was unbranded. Her one garment was a bark cloth robe, soft as velvet, dyed in the batik manner in red, blue and purple on the natural cream-colored background. It came midway along her thighs; the waist, drawn tight with a sash, showed

she was slim, with breasts like a young Gypsy. Around her neck was her one ornament—a ring on a length of brass chain.

The match scorched O'Neil's fingers. He let it drop, lighted another. He walked close to look at the ring. It was a man's signet of heavy gold with an onyx top and a gold globe of the world mounted on it. He looked inside the band, read the gold content sign, the initials "L.R."

"White man's ring," he said.

She nodded, showing her understanding. It was easier to talk now that he could see her face.

"Bring you here, white man?"

She nodded again.

"Chowan? Doc Chowan?"

He was making a wild guess. She simply stared. Evidently the name meant nothing to her.

"L.R." He held the ring in front of her with his hook. "Who is L.R.?"

She shook her head. He didn't know whether she meant she didn't know, or didn't understand.

The second match burned out.

More and more feet were running, a continuous sound, lacking direction.

"I'll have to go." He turned, but she'd grabbed hold of his arm. A man had gone with thudding footsteps past the door of the outer room. He took a couple of steps, trying to pull free. Her fingernails burned his arm.

"I'll be back. Girl, understand me!—I'll be back for you."

She finally understood what he meant. "Yes! To Zelanga be back."

"Don't say I was here. Understand?" "Yes."

He'd have hunted the doors by which he'd come. She still had hold of his arm and was pulling him in the other direction.

He let her lead him beneath a second bead drape, and then almost fell through a sudden opening in the floor.

With unexpected strength she swung him back. He made a blind grab and got hold of a ladder. He lowered himself. His feet touched the mattings of the lower floor. There he paused for a few seconds to make certain she was not following.

He groped and his fingers came in contact with a hard sort of fabric. It was the screen that cut the big room, so now he knew where he was. He was in that part of the room where he'd glimpsed the girl that evening.

He moved on, came to an opening, walked through. He stood listening as men ran past in the dark, some so close he could feel the wind stirred by their passage.

"All right, boys," O'Neil growled, "what's the excitement?"

A man stopped with a rattle of the weapons he was carrying.

"Bondele—me," O'Neil said. "Take me to Bomburo. Bomburo, you understand?"

"Bomburo!" the man repeated in a whisper. Then he lifted his voice and shouted unintelligible native sentences.

Other men were coming. A door became outlined by light. The light grew, and a fetishier entered carrying a pitch-basket lantern in a chain cradle.

"Bomburo," O'Neil repeated walking towards him. He placed a cigarette between his lips and leaned to light it from the pitch basket. "Take me to Bomburo before I split thy skull with my mighty hook!"

A masked man, evidently the head priest for Sabata, Wilula, or one of the other leading fetiches came forward, said something, and motioned for O'Neil to follow. He was led to Bomburo's room.

BOMBURO was lying on his back, eyes open, staring overhead. His mouth tightened revealing his file pointed teeth in a smile. He held the smile without shifting his eyes from the ceiling as O'Neil left the others by the wall and walked across alone.

O'Neil grabbed his arm and took his pulse, cursing all the while at having been "lost" in that madman's maze of a hut.

Finally, Bomburo's lips moved and there was a dry whisper—"Girl. White mama. You say *hokay*? You get lost there, maybe-yes?"

O'Neil dropped the arm. He let a laugh jerk his shoulders. The skinny old Niam was a hard one to fool. He watched the

man with eyes narrowed against ascending cigarette smoke.

"How in hell did you know where I was?"

Bomburo only grinned.

"Who is she?" O'Neil asked.

"Me sick. Sometime when I am without the devil of fever, then——"

"All right. So I'll burn the fever out of you. Then you'll tell?"

"Bomburo could not say *no* with fever gone."

O'Neil glanced at his watch. It was still almost two hours before time for the next pill, so he walked to the wall and sat down to wait.

The fetish house was silent again. Men stood along the walls, revealing themselves now and then through movement, the clink of an arm band, the rattle of iron-tipped arrows. Bomburo seemed to sleep. A window opened on the night, and a bat flew inside, made a swing at the light, and then let the arc carry him to the ceiling where he clung, head down, with eyes shining like black beads. Far away in the jungle he could hear the demented barking of a hyena. Slowly the goat-dip candle burned down and became a red glow with the black shadows of the room crowding in on it. Now he could see the stars outside, and billows of clouds pressing in, and the nearer, black top of a small bokongu tree.

He stood up realizing he'd been asleep and that his two hours had passed. Bomburo was sleeping. Silent as though dead. He woke up while O'Neil was dissolving the sulfapyridine tablet in palm wine.

"Perhaps *bondede* Hook-Arm would like to take young *mama* with him when Bomburo is again among the walking-well."

O'Neil stopped stirring. "You're damned right I would!"

Bomburo showed his entire set of file-pointed teeth as he took the bronze cup and drank.

VII

THERE WERE NO STARS VISIBLE when he stepped outside. Leaves in the treetops whispered, but it was breathless close to earth. A faint phos-

phorescence was visible here and there, hanging to the higher forest. He hurried to reach the hut before storm came.

A voice stopped him as he was walking through the deeper blackness of papaya trees. Warzeka.

"O'Neil!"

He slowed and took three or four steps, trying to make out the man's outline. He didn't draw, but his hand rested on the butt of his Mauser.

Warzeka was standing in the middle of the footpath, his legs set wide, his huge body bent forward a trifle.

"Well?" O'Neil barked.

"You have been to fetish hut. For all night you have been to fetish hut. You have learned much inside, no? You have learned of the Eye of the Leopard and of the white girl, too? And now, as you have promised, you have come to tell your Warzeka."

"Tomorrow, Warzeka."

"Tonight!" There was a raw edge of command in his voice. "Tonight, you hear me? Tonight, as Warzeka say."

"So you're starting that again."

"For eight years Warzeka has been here feeding his blood to these insects of the jungle, letting the fevers and the heat——"

"Get out of my way."

Warzeka stood his ground. His hands were long and partly outthrust. In the dark he looked like some lower form of anthropoid than man.

O'Neil swung his hook in a threatening gesture that made Warzeka retreat a step. When O'Neil still bore down he moved another reluctant step, and then another.

"O'Neil, hear me——"

"Get out of my way!"

O'Neil knew he had that dart-shooting little Nikola cached in the bush at one side or the other. The path was wide enough for two to pass, but Warzeka was stubbornly filling it. O'Neil moved aside and started to crowd past. It placed them close enough together so Nikola, should he let go with his poisoned dart, would be as likely to strike one as the other.

"Where you got him cached?" O'Neil growled.

"What do you mean?"

"Nikola. Now move back." This time

O'Neil did not wait for Warzeka to obey. He came up with his hook, and Warzeka, glimpsing it, fell back, tossing up both forearms to protect his jaw. Instead, O'Neil hooked him by the crotch of the pants, swung a right cross at the same instant.

The hook dragged Warzeka's legs from under him as the blow smashed him down.

Brush tangled the big man's clothes and he was suspended a foot or so off the ground. O'Neil had moved on past so darkness would hide him from Nikola. There he turned and looked down on Warzeka's face. Warzeka was cursing, naming O'Neil the vile words of three languages.

Warzeka struggled, ripping free of thorns. When he was half way up, O'Neil drove his foot to the side of his head and sent him sprawling again. He rolled over, tearing his clothing free and was on hands and knees in the path.

He got to one knee, thrust his huge hands far out, whispered, "I would kill you. I would kill you with these two hands—"

"Warzeka, I'll warn you this once. Make another thrust against me and I'll turn you inside out with a Mauser slug."

Warzeka was carrying a gun—a French "92" by the looks of it, but he didn't make a move to draw. Lightning flashed and its bluish light hung for an instant on his vast, savage face. Then, as though loosed by the bolt's impact, rain commenced sloshing down in successive, flat deluges.

"Yah," Warzeka was saying, "Gun. Always with American, the gun. Friends they mean nothing. White friends. Goot friends that open *schnapps*—"

He was still talking when O'Neil walked through deluge to the cover of his hut.

O'NEIL opened his eyes and commenced dragging himself through layers of sleep while Bobolongonga shook his shoulder.

"*Bwana!* Hear me, in the name of Allah—"

"Get your hands off me before I—"

"*Bwana.* Hear me! Awake for there is hell to pay."

5—Action Stories—Fall

"Yes?"

He was outside the mosquito netting, naked, feeling for the clothes he'd wrung out and spread to dry the night before. Sun was shining, and it struck him with pain like a nail driven between his eyes. For the moment everything was flickering and uncertain. He found a cigarette, put it between his lips.

"Behold, *Bwana*, our visitors!"

O'Neil's eyes focused on three *assagai* men in full war regalia inside the door.

"See how they have come for us?" Bobolongonga was saying. "Did I not tell thee how it would end for us if we did not—"

"Keep still, you're making my head ache." O'Neil got the cigarette lighted and stood with his stump arm thrust out for Bobolongonga to strap the hook on. The *blended* gunga and tobacco was helping his head, and he once again took notice of the warriors who were standing with spears pointed as though ready to charge and run him through.

"Well, what do you want?" he shouted.

Their leader, knowing he'd been addressed but not understanding the words, gestured with an upflung arm and said something. He was commanding O'Neil to leave the hut with them.

"What's wrong?"

When the warrior did not answer, Bobolongonga said, "Your sick man, your Bomburo—he is dead."

O'Neil's lips went tight around the cigarette. He didn't say anything for a while. He sat down on the thatch bed amid a billow of mosquito netting and thrust out his legs. It took Bobolongonga a few seconds to realize that O'Neil wanted his pants on.

The Mauser was hidden by thatch, beneath his hand. He got hold of it, thrust it deep within the bed, then when he lifted his hips for Bobolongonga to complete the task of belting the shorts, he thrust it on beneath the woven-palm wall of the hut. It would be there in case he ever had the chance to return. They'd only take it away from him if he tried to hide it beneath his shirt.

He let Bobolongonga finish dressing him and stood up. His clothes were as wet

as they'd been when he hung them up the night before. Things practically never got dry in that humidity.

"All right," he said, and walked through the door.

The village had a bright, brassy look in the brilliant morning-sun. *Assagai* men were thick around the hut and more of them in war regalia were hurrying from the fetish houses. As they walked across the street and the flat area towards the big hut, Bobolongonga kept up a steady muttering,

"I knew that some day thou wouldst kill a man of importance with thy heathen pills, *O Bwana*. Behold the great hospital of the *bondeles* in Brazzaville! Did they let thee give anyone thy pills there? Did not thy friend, Tom Huston, once say the gendarmes would hang thee by the heels for practicing with medicines without a license? I knew that one day thou wouldst make a mistake and give someone the pills of arsenic instead of aspirin. Now if I had been treating the old chief I would have taken boar's hair, and mixed it with dried blood of bats and perhaps the trimmings of my own toenails, and I would have burned it at midnight singing the chant of N'Pemo. So then he would not have died as he did of thy sulfa fetish, and we would still be free, feasting on tender young beetles in the honey of Yato bees, carried to us by those beautiful wenches of the Meeyada, rather than to be killed and our heads shrunk smaller than the heads of monkeys and mounted on sticks—"

"Stop talking," said O'Neil.

Drums were beating deep inside the hut, and men were chanting to the Black Fetish. More and more drums would join as the day went on, and it would turn to an orgy after nightfall with hundreds of natives dancing themselves into trances, but now there was only the repressed throbbing.

They were taken by the usual route to Bomburo's room.

Bomburo was dead. He lay on his back, lips contracted to a grin, eyes still open. It was possible to discern a purplish cast underlying his skin. No wound, except a tiny pinprick on one shoulder. Beyond

was an open window, the top of the bokongu tree. O'Neil looked along the floor. There was no dart. Nikola had probably retrieved it by means of a silk thread leaving no trace.

"Tell them it was Warzeka," he said wearily to Bobolongonga, knowing it would do no good. "Tell them it was Warzeka and his killer, Nikola. Nikola and a poisoned dart on a string making fools of them."

"And fools of us, too, Master," the black man moaned. "*Ai-ai-Allah*. Protect my two wives for now it is plain that I will not return to Katanga!"

VIII

THE PRISON WAS A CIRCULAR wall of sun-dried brick nine feet high, overlain by a flat roof of ironwood poles thick as a man's thigh and bound down by intricate lashings of bamboo strips now dried and turned hard and tough as a cable. Thatch had been spread across the roof at one time, but most of it had sifted through or blown away, and the midday sun came through in slats of white fire. At about noon a slave woman crept up to the heavy log door and thrust a small calabash of water beneath.

The water was unboiled and musty smelling, but thirst made O'Neil drink his share.

The drums were still beating, but heat deadened them, making them sound futile and impersonal. O'Neil slept for a while, awoke and spat at the hot, evil taste of his mouth. He sucked one of his last cigarettes. It didn't help much. Outside, a guardsman moved once in a while, but there were few other signs of life. A cool stir of air came, signaling the break of afternoon. Drums beat out more loudly, and people started moving in the village. No one really grieved for Bomburo's death. A new fetishier would take his place as chief of the big hut, and that night there'd be an orgy of dancing with the death of O'Neil as its climax.

The sun sank beyond jungle, and almost instantly it was night.

Wind struck suddenly, bending the palms, turning their tops into long

streamers. Then rain came in a slanting deluge. O'Neil ignored the shelter he might have found along the wall and stood beneath a natural gutter formed by two of the ironwood beams, using his hand to channel a stream of rainwater to his mouth.

The drink made him feel better. With the rain still falling, he mounted Bobolongonga's shoulders to test the roof above. The beams were heavy and unyielding, bound tight by the cross-laced bamboo. He swung his hook like an axe, trying to cut the lashings, but it was useless.

Then the storm beat itself out, and the stars came through.

He noticed a new rhythm to the drums. More intricate, rapid, and compelling. Natives commenced carrying firewood from the huts. It was a small blaze at first, turned brown by smudge, then it burst high, lighting the fronts of the fetish huts.

A native girl, naked save for some charms strung around her hips, advanced from the door of the *sabata* fetish hut and commenced executing the slow, sinuous movements of the *m'deup* dance, a bit of fantastic voodoo practiced across the breadth of Africa, and far away in Haiti, and even, O'Neil had been told, in violation of state law along the moonlit bayous of Louisiana.

It would take a long time. The drums would slowly beat her into a trance. There she would sit, rigid, with her eyeballs rolled back in her skull, giving the fetishers their turn. All told it would take at least until three or four A.M. Perhaps much longer. In Sierra Leone he'd seen a *m'deup* girl dance continuously for thirty-eight hours before the trance struck her.

He was feeling for another cigarette when a chunk of wet thatch fell with a slap from between the poles overhead. He watched. One of the poles was being lifted. It moved little by little. Bobolongonga glimpsed it and an exclamation started from his lips. He checked it.

"Bwana—you think—fetish girl—"

"No," O'Neil crossed the hut. The poles had been moved enough for a man to squeeze through and Nikola was peering down.

"Bondele-come," he whispered.

O'Neil climbed upward from Bobolongonga's shoulders, then he lay flat on the roof and used a one-armed snatch to boost the big man up beside him.

NIKOLA had retreated from one ironwood pole to another, the dart gun in his hands, aimed. The other black, Ibulo, had evidently done the work and now was standing below.

"Warzeka!" O'Neil said. "Well, where are you?"

Warzeka's voice came from some tall elephant grass. "Get down, fools. Or would you rather be roasted like sheep on a spit?"

O'Neil vaulted to the ground. He caught a glimmer of gunmetal. Warzeka was getting to his feet, the revolver aimed.

"You see now what a man is Warzeka?" he chortled. "He would help white man—even white man that kick him in face."

"You wouldn't be wanting a little out of it for yourself?"

"Only—so little."

One of the Meeyada guards lay dead in the grass. An *assagai* had been driven through his neck, half severing his head from his body.

"Your dead man?" O'Neil asked.

"No. Ibulo. Mine big Ibulo. He is strong with *assagai*. But he will not kill me. You hear, O'Neil?"

O'Neil laughed. "Still worried about that?"

"I die hard."

They circled the village, O'Neil and Bobolongonga walking abreast with Ibulo and Warzeka behind them, and little Nikola continually reappearing along the path.

A candle had been left burning inside the store. Warzeka went around, closing the jealousies, then he sat down at a table across from O'Neil and divided what was left in the *schnapps* bottle.

"Now, Herr Hook-Arm, you will tell me what is the treasure you and your Dr. Chowan came so far from Kongolo to snatch beneath Warzeka's nose."

"Sure. By the way—what happened to Doc? You might as well tell me. You intend to kill me anyway."

Warzeka made a wry face and spat across the matting. "The fool! He would not talk. Here he was, in this village. Looking for—I do not know what. They might have killed him, these natives, but for old Bomburo who learned that you would follow, and he wanted your pills that kill fever. So, one night, he came here. He sat at this table, in that chair, drinking mine *schnapps*. I asked, but he told me lies. Oil shale. Hah!—who has ever heard of shale made of oil? So I strung him up. By thumbs. Still he made fool's talk, so I used a little the whip. Rhino whip is heavy and your Warzeka strong. I struck him too hard. A mistake. I did not think the man would die so easy. Anyway, he talked—a little. About girl. Girl at fetish hut. She belonged to American geologist with Arab wife. So he said. Geologist by name of Lee Ruskind. *Pah!*—what do I care for girl? When I get moneys, this treasure you seek, can I not buy two-three brown girls at slave market in Taidoi?"

O'Neil recalled the ring she'd been wearing around her neck. The initials inside had been L. R. Lee Ruskind. Doc might have come there looking for her, though it didn't seem reasonable. He had probably found some report of that geologist, Ruskind, and he'd used the Federal Petroleum Company's expense account to do a little private prospecting. O'Neil decided that Doc was looking for the Eye of the Leopard, whatever it was, and sneaked off rather than cut him in.

"She was Ruskind's daughter?"

"So he said. Child of Arab wife dead in N'Kasso. Sold by Kasso savages after Ruskind was killed—but who knows? Or cares? Who would pay ransom for a half-breed brown girl? Money your Warzeka would have. Now I have told you too much. It is your time, Hook-Arm. Tell me first what is the Eye of the Leopard."

"The Eye of the Leopard glows in the dark." O'Neil spoke thoughtfully as though he were quoting the words. He drained his *schnapps*. "Yes it does, Warzeka. You can stand in the black darkness of that fetish hut over there and see that chunk of rock shining at you."

"Hah! You say what—"

"Doesn't that mean anything to you? Haven't you ever heard of radioactivity?"

"You mean—"

"I mean they have a chunk of pitch uranite over there so pure it lights up when they rub goat's wool over it."

"It is worth something?"

"It's worth plenty. They need the stuff back in civilization. Need it in a hurry so they can blast the universe inside-out before things get any worse. The Belgian government, for instance, is offering something like 200,000 francs reward for each new discovery."

"So." Warzeka rubbed his fat palms together. "Two hundred thousand francs is . . . One thousand pounds sterling. Good. And you know where in fetish hut is—"

"I can take you right to the spot if you have the intestines to go with me."

O'Neil was fairly certain it wasn't anything like uranium, but the word had a better sound to it than gold or diamond or a map to the lost mines of Sheba.

Warzeka grinned, stood, rammed the revolver back in its holster. "See? I believe! For you, not the torture. For you with Warzeka the fifty-fifty share."

IX

FETISH DRUMS BEAT THE MONotonous rhythm of the *m'deup* dance and O'Neil walked in time with them, not realizing he was doing it, as he led the way on a circle of the village and paused back of the fetish huts. Bobolongonga came to a crouch beside him, while Warzeka, standing in the shadow of black-thorn, clicked the hammer of the French revolver as an obvious reminder that things had not changed.

There was no sentry in back of the huts. The entire village seemed to be gathered in a wide half circle, watching the naked girl go through the dreary routine of her *m'deup* dance. Near one wide-spreading branch of a bokongu tree he could see the tiny window of Bomburo's room.

"All right," he said to Warzeka. "Come along, and don't let that gun go off. It might be you'd end up tied to one of those voodoo posts, too."

"The Meeyada do not burn. They tie head to springpole and cut neck off at shoulders with two-hand machete." But he lowered the hammer and carried the gun dangling at the end of his gorilla arm.

They walked through moonlight to shadow that was deep alongside the building. Natives, at least two hundred of them, were close as a stone's throw away, their oiled bodies gleaming in the firelight, but they, like the *girots* and the *m'deup* girl, were half-hypnotized by the drum rhythm. Starting beneath the window, O'Neil walked around the curving side of the building for thirty-two steps. Then he commenced ripping through mud, bamboo and woven palm with his hook.

It made noise, but the drums covered it. He struck a main beam, and had to move aside, but in ten minutes there was a hole large enough for a man.

Warzeka stopped him with the gun muzzle. "No. First Warzeka. Then you, then my Ibulo, then your Bobo, and last my Nikola with poisoned dart. That way all will be reminded not to be foolish, so?"

The hole led to a small room that was unfamiliar to him. O'Neil found a doorway, a passage, and walked along it while Warzeka held his belt and kept the gun muzzle in his back. After twenty steps he ran against a blank wall.

He turned back. Warzeka wasn't helping him by dragging on his belt. O'Neil cursed and tried to twist away, but the man was too powerful. He flung O'Neil against the wall and pinned him down with his vast, sweaty body.

"Next time I would kill!"

O'Neil went on, still cursing him. He risked striking a match. The passage ended at a ladder. He knew then where he was. This was the branch leading to Bomburo's quarters.

He blew out the match, went the other way, found the right passage, climbed a ladder, and commenced picking his intricate course toward Zelanga's rooms.

He led Warzeka through the first drape and spoke her name.

"Zelanga!"

He expected her to be down below, presiding over the *m'deup* dance, but he was answered by the sharp inhalation of

her breath, the rustle of her footstep.

"Stay where you are," he said. "Stay there." And repeated, "Stay there!"

Warzeka stopped, "This the girl's? You take me—"

"Come along."

Warzeka went on, reluctantly, through the second drape. He was muttering about the Eye of the Leopard. It was only five steps to that opening to the lower floor. O'Neil found the edge of it and took a long stride trying not to break the rhythm of his walk.

The floor opened for Warzeka, but he'd sensed something at the last moment. He let go O'Neil's belt, muttered a curse, twisted over in a mad grasp for support. The gun exploded, lashing a streak of fire through the blackness.

THE French 92 was not a heavy calibre, but the close confines made it deafening. Powderflash gave him a momentary impression of Warzeka sprawled across the opening, one leg dangling, propped by elbow and the other knee.

O'Neil swung his foot at Warzeka's head.

It was a glancing blow. The gun exploded again and again as fast as Warzeka could pull the double-action, but O'Neil was already on the other side, and had taken a step back toward the girl's rooms.

"Bwana!" Bobolongonga was bellowing. "Bwana, has the swine killed you?"

O'Neil sensed someone in front of him. Nikola. He stopped, instinctively flattened himself against the wall.

Warzeka struck a match.

The flame was unexpected. O'Neil had a momentary impression of Warzeka still on the floor, swinging the revolver around, of Nikola just inside the beaded drape with his dart gun triggered.

He moved by reflex, almost instantaneously with the match flame. His hook came up, caught Nikola's breechclout. His body snapped powerfully forward, dragging the man off his feet, sending him through the air at Warzeka.

Warzeka was unable to check his act of firing. The bullet struck Nikola while he was in midair. It smashed the life out of him and he struck Warzeka a dead



weight. The match was out. O'Neil could hear Warzeka fling the body away. Drums outside were still beating, but the shots had set off a wild shouting, and in a few seconds the hut would be swarming with natives.

"O'Neil, hear me!" Warzeka shouted. "See, I put gun away. No fighting. We have been fools. Wait, we will get out together."

O'Neil knew the man still intended to kill him. Kill him and throw his body to the fetishers. It would be a way to save himself.

He stood still. He could feel movement along the floor as Warzeka crept forward. The passageway was filled with cordite fumes, but despite that he could scent the sweaty closeness of his body.

O'Neil lunged and ripped up with his hook. It caught Warzeka's clothes. The gun exploded, driving flame that scorched O'Neil's face.

O'Neil smashed over a right. The force of it ripped the hook loose and drove Warzeka to the floor. The gun again—wild.

O'Neil dove for the gun. For a second, Warzeka was at a disadvantage beneath him. They struggled for it, but Warzeka's weight and strength asserted itself. He jerked the barrel loose, flung O'Neil against the wall, and swung it at his skull.

It missed and struck O'Neil's shoulder. O'Neil chopped blindly with the hook. There was a chatter of steel on steel. The hook set itself somewhere along the cylinder and ripped the gun from Warzeka's fingers. It went thud-thudding across the floor.

Warzeka plunged forward, trying to clinch. O'Neil tore free. He came back with the hook, instinctively finding the soft flesh beneath Warzeka's jawbone.

Warzeka screamed and tried to writhe free, but O'Neil was braced, and with a snap of his back sent the man sailing headlong. He was free of the hook, and reeling away, blindly seeking escape.

O'Neil followed through the door. Bobolongonga was bellowing his name. Something tangled O'Neil's feet and he fell. When he got up, he lacked direction. Warzeka struck a match.

Warzeka was across the room, groping for the exit. The match revealed a door to him. It wasn't the door they'd come in. O'Neil had no idea to what new maze of passages it led. Warzeka backed into it, still holding the match.

"So. You would give what Yankees call the doublecross. Now it is Warzeka give it. You hear? Warzeka! You will stay here while Warzeka escapes!"

HIS FACE was running blood, and the grin made it grotesque. Still grinning, he ran the match around the door igniting the dry, woven palm fronds. They caught and flamed as though soaked in petrol. The sudden heat drove Warzeka back. He was still hunched and grinning when flame and smoke hid him from view.

Bobolongonga had engaged in a gargantuan struggle with Ibulo. It ended with Ibulo on his back with his own *assagai* pinning him to the floor.

Bobolongonga ripped the *assagai* loose and started as though to follow Warzeka. O'Neil hurled him back.

"Where is she?"

Bobolongonga merely blinked at him.

"Zelanga! The girl . . ."

O'Neil saw her then. She'd swung out one of the wall segments revealing a secret doorway.

"That way?" he asked.

She nodded. He saw a goat-dip lamp, lighted it from spreading flame, followed her, carrying the light ahead of him. As he expected, the door led to the holy of holies, the room of the Leopard Fetish.

It was a smaller room than he'd imagined during the darkness of his previous

visit. Windowless, dome-shaped, plastered with clay and painted dull red with hematite. A tripod of bamboo pieces stood near the middle of the room holding a cone of pounded copper similar to a ring-maker's pattern, and balanced on the point of the cone was a dark, rounded fragment of stone large as a man's fist.

He walked towards it. It changed color as the candle neared. It no longer was dull. A six-pointed star came to life. Transparent scarlet and a hundred times more brilliant than it had seemed glowing from darkness before.

The girl seized his arm, pulled him back. An almost invisible silk thread was stretched waist high. She touched the thread and an *assagai* plunged from above, plunging deep in the hardwood floor. He looked above and could see other spears hanging points down, triggered and ready to fall.

She went ahead of him, stepping lightly to avoid other threads, took the stone and handed it to him. It was a ruby showing that rarest of all refractions—the star refraction of certain sapphires of the East. It would be worth a fortune in Holland, in New York.

There was still the mystery of its glowing in complete darkness, but he saw a tube of bamboo projecting from the ceiling, and realized that candlelight projected through the tube from an upper room would create that illusion. Of such things were the wonders of the fetish cults fabricated.

Flames were roaring through the adjoining room. Already the air was filled with smoke making it almost impossible to breathe. The girl had hold of him, leading him to a door, thence down a dusty, little-used passageway. Natives were rushing through the house. And from somewhere, muffled by many thicknesses of walls, mingling with drums and other voices, he could hear the bellowing voice of Warzeka.

He was lost in the maze of passages. By the sound of him he was charging blindly through darkness. He repeatedly called O'Neil's name. Then he couldn't shout for coughing. The cough became a high, whooping sound. When a man

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look for the bulls-eye

started that amid the dense gas of thatch smoke, he was done for.

"And so much for the house in Prague," said Armless O'Neil.

THE passage led to a ladderway, long disused, then to a tunnel heavy with the smell of moldy earth. The tunnel was at least a hundred meters long, and it took them through the floor of a little, empty room dimly lighted by a smelly oil lamp. From there, a series of little rooms led outside.

They were on the far side of the flat area and no native near them. Flames were already bursting through the roof of the big hut. The drums were still thudding, rhythm unchanged, and oblivious to all else the black girl was still going through the hypnotized movements of her *m'deup* dance.

O'Neil spoke to Bobolongonga, "Take the girl to the tradestore. I'll meet you there after I pick up my Mauser. Toss together some supplies. We'll be safe for another half-hour."

Zelanga had hold of his arm. "I go—with you."

"With Bobolongonga. I'll come."

"No, with you!"

"Sure. I'll take you outside. To Khar-toum, anyhow. We'll find out who you are. Your father perhaps Lee Ruskind? We'll find out if he has any relatives. I'll sell the ruby and it should send you to New York, San Francisco, wherever—"

"All the time I go with you."

O'Neil grinned and said, "All right. You won me over. You go with me."

He let it stay like that. For the time being, anyway. She'd forget him soon enough when she found out what other white men looked like.

All the others had.

THE RED RUSTLER'S BRAND

By 'Gene Cunningham

Chuck Hoban . . . a *lawman*? The gun-wolves howled and declared a sixgun holiday. Then the tin-star younker stepped out to do some slap-leather celebrating himself!

CHUCK HOBAN watched the tall rider coming toward him across the greasewood flat that was the Open A's west pasture. He soon recognized Bull Amber. The twinkle of saddle silver in the Texas sun would have told him who the man was, even if hatred had not made his eyes keener.

"The big son!" Chuck snarled to Grullo, his tall horse. "He certainly struts his size and his money! And here I sit in the middle of a hull a swamp rat wouldn't steal from an empty house—and I own one damn fine horse that I nursed from a sickly colt. Nothing else. And no prospects of owning anything else if I work for Apache Partain until I'm gray-headed!"

His trail across the West Pasture led to the new *manada* that he had to look over. Or he would have turned aside from meeting this newcomer to Bethel County who was the Open A's neighbor and Nell Partain's "steady company." But Apache had given him orders. He had to hunt up the Arab stallion and harem of half-blood mares.

"Well!" Amber said unpleasantly, reining in his tall Morgan black. "If it's not the star horse-wrangler in person! How goes the world, son? Apache raised your pay that fifteen cents a month, yet? I told him he ought to."

He grinned. Chuck Hoban swelled inwardly. But Bull Amber was not only big and dark and handsome. He was also efficient looking.

"You're quite a joker, Mr. Amber," he said thickly. "Quite—a—joker. There's no arguing that a man who works for Apache won't sit down much, or get tired packing his wages around. But a man's

not bound to keep on working for the Open A, you know!"

"Oh me!" Amber grinned. "He's about to go off and leave the Open A to get along best it can. Son, you oughtn't to be so cruel! Besides—I heard you *did* quit, once. . . ."

Dull red came up in Chuck Hoban's weathered face.

"And that's none of your business!" he snarled at the big man. "Seems to me you got enough to worry about, what with a one-horse outfit that never did make expenses—that three owned before you came into Bethel County and let 'em unload it on you. You—"

Bull Amber's hand jerked. But not to the white-handled Colt. Instead, it brought up the heavy quirt he carried. The lash striped Chuck's face from forehead to chin and the impact drove him back upon the cantle of his saddle.

"You— You—" Chuck gasped. He clung to the saddle horn with left hand and with the right fumbled blindly, instinctively, as if he had a gun sagging there. Amber watched, sneering.

CHUCK twisted Grullo flashingly and squeezed the big horse. Grullo put back his ears and reared with snapping teeth. The Morgan whirled away and Grullo followed in a jump, to cannon cleverly into the black. For he was Chuck's life-work, almost; a horse that knew as much as a man. And the Morgan, long-legged as he was, had no chance against a horse that moved like a boxer.

There was a red haze before Chuck's eyes. He saw that Amber who, for the first few moments had had all he could do merely to keep his saddle, was snatch-

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Grullo's hoofs drove Abbott's horse down, and Chuck had his gun out.

ing for the Colt—but it made no difference to him. He wanted only to get hold of the big man.

Then interruption came—the furious bellow of old Apache Partain, riding out of some arroyo.

"Cut that out! Cut that out!"

The red mist cleared from Chuck's eyes. He shook his head dazedly. Apache came up at the gallop and Chuck saw Amber's hand fall away from Colt butt.

"What the hell's this, anyhow?" Apache yelled. "Chuck! You get to hell back to the house! I seen to that *menathy* while I was waiting for you to get around to it. You get back and get onto that horse corral. Maybe snaking cottonwood logs around'll learn you something! You—"

Chuck drew a long breath. Somehow, fury left him with the sound of the grim old man's edged voice. He turned Grullo and went blindly back along the trail he had come over. The stripe of the quirt lash was like hot iron on his face. And if old Apache had not ridden up, he would be dead, now . . . He knew it; and, as he dropped off Grullo at Juniper Spring and put his face into the cold water, he considered all that he knew of Bull Amber.

"He's a killer!" he thought. "He would have shot me—even though I didn't have a gun on—and talked himself clear. Maybe he would have planted a gun on me—that'd be like him—but I know one thing—this country's going to be too little for us both. I am going to kill Bull Amber or he's going to kill me. And I'm not going to let him stampede me into a fight I'm not ready for, either!"

Flat upon his back, he looked through the thin foliage of the junipers up at the clear cloud-dappled blue of the sky. And the gash on his face, eased as it was by the water, still throbbed painfully enough to keep hard his resolution. He was done on the Open A. From this on, he was a man accountable to nobody for his actions.

He mounted Grullo and rode over the foothills to the Open A house. He was in the shabby bunkhouse of which, just now, he was sole occupant, when Nell Partain came past the corral calling him. He swore furiously under-breath. He had intended to be gone before Nell could get

outside. But she had seen Grullo by the corral. There was no use trying to dodge her.

"What in the world—?" she began amazedly, at the sight of his scarred face. Then: "*You met Bull Amber!*"

Chuck stared at her. Somehow, for the first time in the five years he had known her, he could meet her stare without confusion. There was an icy spot somewhere inside him. It steadied him. The Colt he had rammed into his waistband beneath his shirt was out of sight, was another steadying thing.

"Yes, I met Amber," he told her quietly.

"Chuck! I don't know what to make of you!" the girl cried exasperatedly. "You go—"

Muscle ridges bulged along his jaw.

"Who told you it was your affair to make *anything* out of me?" he demanded in the same flat voice. "As far as that goes, the Open A has managed to make a first-class damn fool out of me for better than five years. It came to me today."

She stared at him and when he turned back to his packing, she came up to the door and watched.

"Are you quitting?" she asked, in an odd voice.

"No! I've quit. I'll be off the Open A in five minutes."

"Oh! Does Apache know?" she asked curiously.

"Reckon not. I made up my mind after I saw him last."

"What are you going to do, Chuck?"

He turned, tying the mouth of the tow sack that held his extra clothing, his few personal belongings. There was an odd note in the girl's voice. He looked curiously at her. He had expected a different attitude. Now, he hardly knew what to say. He hated to confess that he had no plan; that he was going to ride the chuck-line and hunt a job—any job that would take him out of this neighborhood—away from the prospective father-in-law of the man he intended to kill.

Or be killed by. . .

"**T**HINKING of going to work for Quill Monteith," he told her in what he tried to make a careless voice—as

if it didn't matter whether he became a deputy of Sheriff Monteith, or not.

"Oh!" Nell Partain said and there was something like a smile about the corners of red mouth. "Another cowboy-with-a plan! You think you can catch Monteith's elusive Red Rustler?"

"Oughtn't to be too hard," Chuck shrugged. He had not even thought of the epidemic of robberies and rustling which had so far been too much for the big grim sheriff. "We'll see."

She stepped away to let him come out, tie the sack on his saddle and turn. Dark eyes were unreadable, but still the little shadowy smile hovered about her mouth. Chuck hesitated. It was hard, leaving her like this. But he had never had a chance with her. He had just been the odd-jobs boy around the Open A, bossed by her as by her father. His face hardened.

"Good-bye, Nell!" he said slowly.

"Oh, I'll be seeing you!" she told him.

"Luck to you!"

And all the way to Tivan he puzzled over her manner. She had not tried to keep him on the ranch. She had not threatened with her father's name. He could not make it out.

"Unless," he frowned, "I'm so damn unimportant it didn't mean a thing to her."

He put Grullo in the livery barn and told the hostler that he would be in town overnight, anyway. Then he went up to the court house where Quill Monteith held the double office of sheriff and tax collector. He found Yoakum Thrasher alone in the office. The short fat deputy was writing steadily in a great ledger. He rolled pale eyes toward Chuck.

"Sheriff's out in the country some where," he shrugged, at Chuck's question. "And I got to get out this tax roll and keep the town quiet, too! All I need is a couple more arms. I could get along with just one more leg."

Chuck nodded, scowling at his shabby boot toes. Then he said he would come back and went toward town.

He heard someone yelling from the other side of the street. It was Ship Ronald and the redheaded cowboy boasted a blackened eye. But he could grin with swollen lips. Unconsciously, Chuck put up



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a hand to his own striped face, at the sight of his friend's decorations.

"That puffed-up neighbor of yours, Bull Amber," Ship explained, before Chuck could speak. "Yeh. Crowded me and I crawled his hump. He got in these two before I could come close enough to curry him. But when they finally pulled us apart, he was on the ground about to yell *calfropel!*"

"You mean that Amber's in town?" Chuck grunted. "Why, I met him in the west pasture—"

"He said he met you," Ship nodded, looking past Chuck. "He said he took a quirt to you—Chuck! Has working for the damn Open A clean busted your nerve? Whyn't you—"

"I did!" Chuck nodded in his turn. "Amber hit me with a quirt and I pushed Grullo into him. He went for a gun before I could get to him. I reckon he'd have shot me, too, but Apache—"

Curtly, he told the rest of the tale. Ship Ronald stared, shaking his head incredulously.

"And you quit! Boy, old Apache'll just bodaciously raise holy hell. He'll be coming in looking for you. You're a wiz' with horses and he knows it. Nobody can handle stallions like you can. So he'll come a-bellowing and a-pawing the ground. And—think you can stand him off this time?"

Chuck hesitated for an instant. The picture of a wrathful Apache Partain, called up by Ship's boding words, was in no feature pleasant to consider. Then the dull throb of that quirt stripe on his face hardened his mouth. He nodded. They went on down the street together.

"Quill Monteith's not going to pin any star on you!" Ship told Chuck abruptly. "You hadn't ought to of told Nell that. She'll tell Apache and it'll give 'em another laugh at you. Whyn't you say you'd rather work for some sheep outfit than hang out any longer on the Open A? Whyn't you—"

"Oh, shut up!" Chuck snarled. "I said the first thing that popped into my mind. If I'd had a week to figure up a good answer, it'd been different. But—"

They were passing the Pronghorn Saloon. The swing doors flapped without

warning and out upon the plank veranda lurched Bull Amber. He stopped squarely in their path.

"You son!" he snarled and swung instantly at Ship.

The big fist grazed Ship's jaw. He staggered backward, and caught a boot heel on the edge of a plank and fell against one of the awning posts.

SO quickly had it come that Chuck was still gaping at the fallen Ship when Bull Amber stepped forward and kicked Ship on the cheek. Amber was swearing in steady monotone.

"Cut that out, you illegitimate!" a high, harsh voice commanded—and Chuck Hoban was amazed to find that voice his own; rather surprised, too, that he was walking in at Amber.

"What?" Amber snarled, turning. "You telling me—"

His hand went under his coat. But Chuck, animated by something like desperation, jumped at him, swinging an awkward overhand right. His fist caught Amber on the mouth, staggered him. Chuck snatched with his left hand at Amber's gun wrist, bore down heavily on it and struck the big man three times in the stomach. Amber's gun hand fell away from the pistol under his coat. Chuck let go the hold he had upon the wrist. He rained furious blows at the big man's body. He drove him backward, kept him from getting set, landed almost at will.

Amber took one of the terrific rights to the belt and sat down, then fell backward. His mouth opened and closed convulsively; his eyes rolled up, showing all white. Chuck stood over him panting, shaking his head. And a thick slow voice behind him brought him out of the red mist that swam all around his head.

"And I picked a fight with him—to keep him from—going after you again!" Ship Ronald said disgustedly. "Hell!"

Cowboys, townfolk, crowded up. Amber sat up, propping himself erect. He glared stupidly around. Chuck watched him. Suddenly he remembered the gun under Amber's coat. He hardly expected Amber to make a gunplay here, before all these watchers, but—

"What's all this?" Apache Partain's voice came snarlingly from beyond the fringe of the crowd. "Chuck Hoban! You—"

Slowly, moved unwillingly by that familiar dreaded tone, Chuck turned. The Open A buckboard was there at the veranda's edge. Nell Partain sat beside Apache. Her face was blank as she looked at Chuck. She seemed uninterested in the affair.

Amber stood up. Chuck saw out of the corner of an eye. Apache looked at Amber. The grizzled jaw sagged a little at sight of Amber's swollen mouth, the gap where a tooth had gone under Chuck's flailing fist. Nell's eyes slid that way, too. But there was no change in her expression.

"Two of 'em!" Amber said thickly. "Hoban and Ronald. One hit me from behind—"

"So you're a liar as well as a sure-thing gun artist," Ship Ronald interrupted him. "Chuck beat the living hell out of you, all by his lonesome, because I was out cold. And it hurts your swelled-up feelings because you've been strutting around town a long while. He—"

"Chuck!" Apache bellowed suddenly. "You *git* on your horse and hightail it back to the ranch! I told you to finish that horse corral. Going to talk Quill Monteith out of a star, huh? Going to try being a deputy, huh? *Git* out of this, before I am plumb disgusted. I'll deputy you! I—"

A HAND touched Chuck's arm. With the Indian-soundlessness that was uncanny in so tall a man, Quill Monteith had got up beside Chuck. Now, craggy face holding something like the shadow of a grin, Quill looked at the smaller man.

He lifted a hand to quiet the crowd.

"I wonder how much noise you'd make, Apache," the sheriff drawled, "if you was to really yell? And what's the use of it, half the time? Like now—yelling at Chuck like he was still your hand. When he's going to work for me. Come on, Chuck. Let's go down to the office and I'll swear you in. You, too, Ship! I don't want any more fighting on the street to-



day. Ears all right, Amber? You could hear me?"

His flinty gray eyes were very steady on Bull Amber. Then he turned and with Ship and Chuck trailing, went toward the court house.

Yoakum Thrasher was not now at the tax roll. Quill fumbled in a table drawer, found a ringed star labeled *Deputy Sheriff, Bethel County*, and tossed it to Chuck.

"Got a pistol?" he grunted, then as Chuck began instinctively to reach under his shirt: "*Wait a minute!* If you got one, all right. If you ain't, you can get one."

Ship Ronald looked wearily at Chuck and shook his head.

"You damn nitwit!" he said. "Happen you ever hear about a no-gun rule in Tivan?"



Chuck reddened and held up his right hand. In a blurry monotone Quill Monteith swore him in. And then he grinned at Chuck.

"Now we'll have a little talk," he said. "Nothing like understanding each other. You see, Chuck, there really ain't a lot of work in the office right now. We got a li'l smear of this son that rustles cows, robs ranches and calls himself the Red Rustler, but I'm handling him myself. Yoakum is a good man on the tax rolls, account of he used to clerk in the store and he's good at figures. So right now, we won't need you in the office—"

He looked hard at Ship Ronald, who had suddenly begun to grin and now lifted blue eyes innocently to stare at the fly-specked Winchester calendar on the office wall.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "Why all the chessy-cat grin?"

"Nothing," Ship said in a surprised voice. "Only—I heard about you buying the Windowsash and—Chuck is the top-hand of this county at horse-wrangling."

"Well!" Quill Monteith said defiantly. "I'm paying forty a month, same as the county pays. When there's office work, he's on the county roll. Other times, when he's on the Windowsash with my horses, I pay him. Is that all right, Chuck?"

Chuck nodded doubtfully. He was disappointed. He had expected to ride over

the county, behind that star, looking for traces of the rustlers who had struck right and left in the past six months. And he had thought it possible that his trailing might lead him once in a while to the Open A.

"It'll beat slaving on the Open A," he admitted.

"Fine!" Monteith beamed. "I tell you right out, I was thinking about you when I looked at the Windowsash. That's a right good bunch of horses out there. Of course, we got to weed out the scrubs and get rid of some old 'n's. But I count a lot on you, Chuck. We'll make a horse ranch out of the Windowsash, yet."

Going back toward town, to buy clothes and shells and tobacco at Caven's store on the sheriff's account, Ship Ronald looked sardonically at his friend.

"What a deputy you turned out to be!" he drawled. "Well—! If our hoss rustler should happen to come by the Windowsash, riding chuckline, you can hobble him and annex that thirty-five hundred reward—But—I don't know much about the Windowsash. Chuck. What kind of land's that? Sand, with greasewood, on the flats and black dirt on the hills?"

"Yeh," Chuck answered unguardedly, "About the same as the Open A. Good pastures on the slopes—"

"Uh-uh! It won't do." Ship told him sadly. "That kind of ground's no good for raising stage robbers!"

QUILL MONTEITH prepared to leave the Windowsash with dawn. It was his eighth trip to the ranch within two weeks. He made a thin cigarette and looked affectionately at Chuck.

"Now don't take it to heart because I keep you out here, son," he said. "Ain't a thing in the world in the office. I've got some lines out. I'm going to snare me them rustlers pretty soon and I don't need help. And the place, here, does need you. You've done wonders. Tell you! Three months at forty dollars, then I'll ooch your pay to fifty."

"All right," Chuck nodded. "But I did hope you'd let me do some deputy work, Quill. Ship Ronald was by, yesterday. He says the rustlers hit pretty hard and

dirty at Bluebonnet Flat the other day. They raided the ranch-house itself. Hitting that defenseless woman was pretty lowdown."

"I'll gather 'em in," Quill said grimly. Something like a mask seemed to slide over his craggy face, his flinty eyes. "I got some notions. But you can't always use a notion for evidence in court, Chuck. I—Ne' mind! Keep on going like you been doing. I'll bring that bunch in."

Chuck watched him go, then went out to the corral where he had a horse to shoe. He was finished around the smithy at ten. He looked at the sky, looked in the direction of the Open A, and smiled.

He got his saddle and threw it on Grullo, rode off toward Partain's. As he rode he looked down at the star on his shirt. Absently, he polished it with a sleeve.

There was nobody in the house when he called. He stood in the door, looking about the long living-room which Nell had made the brightest, pleasantest room in Bethel County.

He went on through toward the kitchen. The door of Nell's bedroom was open and mechanically he looked in. Something shiny on her dressing table caught his eye. He hesitated, then went in and picked up the small silver-plated, pearl-handled .32 revolver.

Mechanically, as he wondered where she had got it, he turned it in his hand. And where the number should have been was a smooth bright patch of metal.

"I'll be damned!" Chuck said slowly. "Filed off! Now—why would anybody but a criminal want to file off the number? I—wonder!"

On impulse he carried the gun out into the living-room and got the screwdriver from a drawer of Nell's sewing machine. He took the little gun apart and looked for the hidden number in the frame's interior.

"Thirty-five, six-seven-nine," he grunted. "Easy to remember. And lucky I happened to know that trick of the double numbers on this make of double-action. . . . If Nell picked up that gun somehow, chances are some scoundrel lost it—" he paused at the sound of hoofbeats.

HE lifted his head and with sight of Nell riding toward the house he went quickly to return the pistol to her table. He was standing in the door when she got there.

"Hel-lo!" she greeted him. "Is this an official call? Have I done something—or has Apache done something?"

"You've done plenty, in your time," he told her evenly. And he had the same odd sense of change within himself that he had observed on the day of his leaving here. He could look at her steadily—he could talk to her as an equal. "Let me take care of your horse for you."

When he had put Darcy in the little pasture and hung up her saddle, he came back to the kitchen door. Nell, sleeves of gingham dress rolled high on shapely arms, held up a pan of fried pies invitingly. He came to her and stood close while he ate. She worked about the table and when she looked at him it was with calm face, but with the shadow of a smile at her mouth corners. She asked him how he liked working for Quill and he said "fine!" and wiped his hands upon his overalls.

"What did you mean that I'd done plenty in my time?" she asked presently. Now there was the faintest, loveliest touch of color in her smooth cheeks.

"Plenty—to me," Chuck told her evenly, looking at the pies. "You made me fall head-over-heels in love with you. And that was tough. For I didn't have a chance. I was making twenty-five and cakes, here, and treated like—why, I couldn't have been treated any *more* like a dog if I'd been Apache's own son! And, too, there was Mr. Amber—Apache's handpicked son-in-law."

"He has all the qualifications you never showed. He wouldn't work for twenty-five a month, or be treated like a dog. And he is pretty well-to-do . . ."

She drew a pan of potatoes toward her, picked it up and carried it to a chair by the door. When she sat down, with the pan upon her lap, the breeze came in to stir her dusky hair. Chuck followed, to lean against the wall above her.

"He gave me a pistol the other day," she said in a careless voice. "It's a pretty little thing. He bought it second hand

somewhere and cleaned it for me. He—"

Chuck finished the movement he had begun, kissed her on the back of the neck and straightened.

"Did he file the number off?" he asked.

"Chuck Hoban! What do you *mean* by kissing me?" she demanded. "Why—I don't know who filed the number off. Did you see the pistol in my room?"

CHUCK said nothing. He stared at her, but hardly saw her. For something had clicked in his mind. He had asked himself a dozen times how Bull Amber could make the splurge he did, on the non-existent earnings of a little run-down ranch. Now—the chain seemed to him perfect; A gun with number filed off; Bull Amber who had "bought it second hand"; mysterious rustlers, and thieves; Bull Amber and two hard-faced cowboys on the 4F. . . .

"Be still!" he said imperatively to Nell Partain, when she spoke to him. "You bother me. I'm thinking."

"Well! I like that! He comes in and because he's wearing a badge, he thinks he can kiss me in my own kitchen—and tell me to be still—"

Then she stopped abruptly. For the pan of potatoes went flying and she was drawn up into Chuck Hoban's arms, held so close against the new blue flannel shirt that she could hardly breathe. And with a hand under her round chin Chuck lifted her mouth to his.

"Chuck!" she said gaspingly, quite a while later. "You—you can't do that! Apache—"

"Apache's no more trouble of mine!" Chuck assured her emphatically. "Me, I'm a free white citizen of the State of Texas. More! I'm a deputy sheriff and I have a hot line on thirty-five hundred dollars' worth of rustlers! When I cash in I'm going to buy half the Windowsash from Quill and partner with him. And unless you tell me something you *can't* say without lying—"

He kissed her again, ran out at awkward high-heeled gait to Grullo, and took the saddle without touching stirrups.

From the kitchen door Nell called to him, called again and again. He only

waved to her and rode toward the 4F line at a long lope. His eyes were lowered alternately to the polished badge upon his shirt and to the Colt sagging in its holster, low on his left thigh with butt to front for a cross-arm draw.

He had no sense of nervousness. Somehow, memory of Nell in his arms was too vivid, and thought of the reward—of a half-interest in the Window-sash—was too attractive. He would somehow take in those three at the 4F. He would herd them into Tivan, push them down the street for everyone to see, then lodge them in the jail.

HE crossed the 4F range and foxtrotted toward the little stone house. Bull Amber appeared in the door. He stood there, moveless, watching Chuck. His dark face was inscrutable when Chuck pulled in before him.

"What the hell are you doing on my range?" Amber demanded metallically.

Chuck had already looked the big man over. He found no evidence of a weapon on Amber. There was no bulge under the shirt to betoken a shoulder holster. He swung down, then.

"I want to talk to you," he answered quietly.

Amber shook his head slowly.

"You haven't got a thing to say to me. And if you've got two thoughts more than any old gray goose, you'll get to hell away from here before I lose holds on my temper—"

"To hell with your temper—and your holds!" Chuck told him. "I happen to be a deputy sheriff in this county and when I want to ask you questions, I will. You'd better answer, too, or else— Where did you get that lady's gun you gave Nell?"

"None of your damn' business!" Amber said promptly. But there seemed to be a change in his expression, now. He looked somehow more watchful—and not at all more pleasant. "You asked your question. You got your answer. So—"

"Getting along pretty well with the 4F?" Chuck inquired blandly. "Beats all, how one man can have all kinds of money, with no—no way we can *see* of getting it, except an outfit that never makes a penny.

An outfit like—like this!"

Amber came out of the door with a rush, fists swinging. Chuck gave ground, but Amber was faster than he had thought. Chuck took a heavy blow to the body, twisted and swung desperately at Amber's face. Then they were standing toe-to-toe, slugging furiously. Chuck was forced to break away. Amber hit too hard for him. He came back, stooping, caught Amber by the leg and jerked. Amber staggered and fell on his back half-in the door. Chuck rushed after him. Amber rolled and kicked at him. Chuck caught the foot that whipped up and went on by, twisting the long body on the house floor.

He flung himself upon Amber and whipped short, hard punches to the face. They were wrestling across the splintery floor when Nell Partain's angry voice from the door stopped Chuck.

"Chuck! Listen to me!" she cried. "Get up from there!"

Chuck straightened, came to his knees, then to his feet. He looked at her frowningly. She flung out both hands in exasperated gesture.

"You're all wrong! He's no rustler! I know it, because he was at the house when the Circle T was raided the last two times! It didn't dawn on me that *this* was your bright idea until you'd gone. I had to catch Darky and saddle—"

She screamed and Chuck whirled back to Amber. The big man was sitting up, now. From back waistband he had jerked a Colt. It was coming up to level when Chuck snatched desperately at his own gun, got it out cocked, flipped it to cover Amber and let the hammer drop. With the roar of it, something slapped his hat-rim. He fell again, half-blindly.

Amber fell sprawling on the floor, pistol dropping. Chuck gaped at him. His mouth was dry. His hands began to shake.

SECONDS passed before he could make himself go toward Amber. He raked away the other's Colt mechanically, with his toe. Then he bent. Amber moved and groaned. Nell came quickly to kneel beside Amber.

"He—he's not dead!" Chuck said slowly.

"And he won't die, if we get him fixed," she said waspishly. "Get me some water—and something for bandages. You hit him high up on the right side. The second shot went wide."

Chuck got the washpan and a bucket of water, found a clean shirt and brought all back. He helped with the bandaging, and hunted out a bottle of whiskey. Nell took the liquor.

"Now!" she said briskly, "he'll be all right. I'll stay with him while you ride back to the house and telephone to Tivan. Call the doctor and Quill Monteith. If you see Apache on the way send him over, too."

Chuck nodded. He looked grimly down at Amber, who was staring malignantly up at him, now. He was very tired, Chuck; the bruises made by Amber's fists ached. For his brilliant chain of "evidence" had been destroyed with a sentence of the girl's. No matter how or where Bull Amber had got that little pistol with its suspiciously filed number spot, Amber was no rustler.

"You had killing coming to you!" he told Amber. "In a way, I'm sorry I didn't finish the job this time. But I'm warning you—this country's not big enough for us both. When you get over this I'm going to slap your face on Tivan's main street. And when you go for a gun next time I'll have my face to you!"

He went out and mounted Grullo. He did not hurry as he back-trailed toward the line fence. So he was still in the broken foothills of the 4F when he saw three riders jogging toward him.

Staring steadily—as they stared at him—he recognized Amber's two cowboys. One he knew as Abbott, a middle-sized, middle-aged man remarkable only for his ugly face. The other Chuck had heard called nothing but "Wrench," which he took for a nickname. The third man was a saloon bum of Tivan, a shifty-eyed little tinhorn gambler named Jerrel.

He rode toward them and they, close together, came at a slow trot his way. They pulled in. Abbott stared without friendliness at Chuck.

"What the hell you doing on our range?" he asked belligerently. "Maybe you think that tin star gives you privileges!"

Wrench and Jerrel looked from Abbott to Chuck. Also, it came to Chuck, they looked all around the horizon.

"I've been talking to your boss," Chuck replied coolly. "As for the rest—I damn' well go where I damn' well please! I—"

Abbott spurred his horse suddenly—sent it straight at Grullo. His hand somehow now held a pistol. And Jerrel and Wrench jumped their horses at Chuck, also.

"Kill the illegitimate!" Jerrel rasped, and fired, a miss.

GRULLO reared on hind-legs at the touch of reins on neck. He brought a hoof down on the crown of Abbott's horse, drove it to its knees. Abbott clawed at the saddle horn, but went off. And Chuck had his gun out, now. He shot Jerrel through the body and the little man consciously or unconsciously spurred his runty bay and it ran away. But Wrench was on Chuck's side and with the bellow of the 4F man's pistol, there was flaming pain in Chuck's body. Abbott was getting off the ground. He fired almost in Chuck's face, but the slug missed.

Chuck clung to the saddle horn with left hand and fired at Wrench with a lunge that almost brought the pistol muzzle against the other's body. Then he squeezed Grullo and the big horse squealed and jumped at Abbott.

Chuck hung on desperately. He saw Abbott go back like something thrown, struck by Grullo's knee. He leaned from the saddle and shot at Abbott. Then he whirled Grullo back. But Wrench was on the ground, now, face contorted, pallid, eyes half-closed.

"Looks like—clean up!" Chuck said thickly, aloud. He put his hand up to his breast. It came away daubed with blood. "Wonder if—Bull Amber—sicked 'em onto me—"

He sat slumped in the saddle, panting. The wound in his chest no longer burned. But it was now a throbbing ache that went clear through him. He looked vaguely around. Jerrel had fallen a hundred yards

away. He still held his reins and the little bay horse stood beside him. Wrench was groaning. Abbott, too, moved like a broken-backed snake on the ground.

Chuck pushed Grullo toward the nearest horse—that of Wrench. There might be whiskey in the saddle bag, he thought. He fumbled with the flap but instead of a bottle, or the usual odds and ends of pliers and tie strings carried by most cowboys, he fished out a heavy gold watch, then a long wallet and another watch, another purse. He gaped at them, moved Grullo to the other side and investigated the off saddle bag. Here he found the whiskey, half a pint. He gulped it down and felt better.

"So these are the robbers," he thought, "Abbott and Wrench and Jerrel. And—"

He got down very carefully and sat upon the ground, to get out of his shirt and improvise a bandage. As nearly as he could tell, the slug which had struck him had not gone through. Right shoulder blade ached as if it held the lead. When he had stoped the bleeding somewhat, he went on his knees to Abbott. The ugly little man stared at him with glazed eyes.

"You got a chance, if you talk," Chuck told him. "If you want to get that hole patched up, you had better talk. Was Amber the Red Rustler?"

He bent to hear the faint reply.

"No," Abbott whispered. "He's—rich family—no good—they give him money—to stay away. Wrench was the boss—not Amber."

"Who sold him that pearl-handled gun?"

"Wrench. Got it off—Circle T—six months back. Wrench was drunk. Oughtn't to—done it—fired off the number—"

His voice trailed off and his eyes closed.

Chuck looking about, was surprised to see how the foothills had become liquid. They turned to waves and rolled as if wind-whipped. And he was dizzy, trying to keep his balance. He could see himself in the middle of a picture that once had hung on his mother's sitting-room wall, a blue and green picture of the sea. But the waves rolled so that he could not keep his balance in the picture. He fell out—fell endless distances.

Down . . . down . . .

CHUCK opened his eyes. Ship Ronald's face was close to his. Chuck could not understand how Ship had got there. Then his shifting eyes found old Apache Partain and another man, staring down at him.

Ship grasped him by the shoulders, raised him so that he rested against his knee.

"How you feel?" Ship demanded anxiously. "We got a buckboard coming from the Open A, to pack you-all in. Quill's worse off than you. He met the bunch as they was coming back from the robbery and they shot hell out of him. Left him for dead. But I happened along, still looking for that Lazy-9 horse. I brought him away until I met Apache and a couple of his boys—"

The voice and face faded away again. Chuck knew dimly when he was lifted; and the jolting of the buckboard wheels over rough ground hurt him terribly until he lapsed into unconsciousness again. When he opened his eyes at last, a white ceiling was above him.

"Well!" Nell Partain said, from somewhere out of sight. "You decided to wake, did you?"

She came around to put a hand on his forehead and smile at him. He frowned, for there were tears on the long, dark lashes and he had never seen Nell cry.

"Have I—been asleep—long?"

"Oh, you've just slept about fifteen hours. But you were unconscious for a few hours, and raving for two days, before we got the fever out of you."

"How's Quill?"

"Better than you, though he was much

worse in the beginning. You'll both be a long time on the shelf, getting back your strength."

She fed him something out of a spoon and he slept again. For what seemed ages the process was repeated. But when he waked to find sun streaming through a window his head was clear and he felt well except for his weakness. And when Nell came into the room, he could smile.

"I'm all right," he said. "Come talk to me."

"Well—Quill's ready to be moved back to town. And so is Wrench. Yoakum Thrasher got a statement from Wrench—a confession, it amounted to. Amber's up, but—I hear the 4F is for sale."

He looked inquiringly at her. She flushed.

"No! No! He's not the handicapped son-in-law, any longer. But—you want to know about Jerrel and Abbott. I oughtn't to tell you. Ship Ronald said it would hurt your feelings . . . He thought you had killed them, you know. But both will live to go to the penitentiary."

"And that leaves—" he looked at her steadily, "—you. . . ."

"Leaves me? How do mean it leaves me?"

She came to her knees beside the bed and took his limp hand between her palms.

"Do you think you can come into my kitchen—and kiss me—and cause the biggest row in Open A history between Apache and me—and then do anything but marry me?"

"I suppose I'll have to," he said. "Because—I'd be miserable the rest of my life, if I didn't!"

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One Thread For A Hangnoose

By ALBERT J. CALANDRA

When low-holstered Death stalked into Wimpy Sloan's saddle shop, the old rawhide-wrassler gave it one swift glance and turned back to his work-bench—to a job he was suddenly plumb anxious to finish.



The sheriff's Colt appeared in a flashing half-arc of speed . . .

R UFE POTTER STEPPED OUT of tall man's stirrups with deliberate slowness. The same studied carefulness had marked his two months search for a certain man. Fifteen years of rock-crushing had chiseled his features and sharpened his desire to gun the man who had testified against him. Every bit of information he'd picked up about this man along the trail had pointed to Sun City. But where in Sun City, he'd asked himself?

The lines in Rufe's face had deepened and darkened with each additional mile. Tiredly, now, he tied his horse at the first convenient hitch-rail. He looked up and down the rutted street. It was dusk and patches of yellow light seeped through the drawn shades. Then Rufe spied a sign that snapped him into alertness with the sting of a bull whip. He pushed a cheroot into his mouth and lighted it. Then he held the match up to read the words better.

WIMPY SLOAN, FANCY SADDLER
TEXAS AND CALIFORNIA SADDLES

The man Rufe was looking for had been a saddler!

Rufe sensed, of course, that the man named McLaren who had testified against him probably used a different handle now. For even as he'd turned away from the Judge that day he'd sworn he would be out gunning for him. So the name on the sign was not too important.

Rufe braced himself and stomped up the steps. He pushed open the heavy plank door. A leathery odor greeted him and as he glanced to his left he saw a man who came close to fitting the description. The man was about forty-five and his shaggy head was greying at the temples. He was bending over a work bench, stitching a saddle.

The man turned slowly and Rufe felt himself go taut. He got a good look, full face, and his spirits flagged. The man he was looking for had been gaunt cheeked. Wimpy Sloan, however, was heavy jowled. He was also wearing a full mustache. Still, fifteen years could do a lot to a man . . . and Rufe decided not to leave until he was sure.

"Howdy, stranger," Wimpy said.

Rufe got another shock. The man's voice was low and husky. Years ago, the man had testified in a high, shrill voice. Still, he thought, years could change a man's voice as well as his looks.

Rufe ignored the greeting. He walked slowly toward the saddler, his eyes riveting upon the man's features, probing for some unmistakable sign that would prove this was the man. The saddler had dropped his hand holding the sewing-awl and except for a slight tightening about the eyes—that may have been from curiosity—he gave no sign of ever having seen Rufe before.

Finally, Rufe said, "I'm on my way to Twin Gaps . . . thought I'd put up in town for the night. While I'm here, I'd like to get a new bridle."

The saddler shifted on his stool but he continued to work on the saddle. "Reckon I can outfit you," he said. "But you'll have to wait a mite. Almost finished with

this job . . . and it's kinda important."

Rufe reflected. After waiting all these years, he was in no great hurry. Something kept telling him that he had finally found his man. Yet, he had to be sure. He began to browse about the musty little shop. Now and then he shot swift glances at the humped over man at the work bench. He watched the fingers that held the long needle, and he tried to remember . . .

Then Rufe recalled an incident from out of the past. This man he was looking for would have a deep scar on his right shoulder. Rufe remembered a young saddler who had drawn a gun on a deputy. The deputy had shattered the youngster's shoulder with a holster shot that hadn't been equaled in those parts for years.

R UFE drummed nervously with reins-calloused fingers. How could he get this Wimpy Sloan to remove the buckskin jacket he was wearing so he could see if the scar was there? He knew he'd have to do it without arousing suspicion. The saddler might have recognized him by now . . . and would start blasting away at the slightest incident. Rufe wasn't taking any chances, not after fifteen years!

Rufe moved toward the busy saddler. He watched the man's hand flash up and down as he stitched leather for the saddle he was completing.

"You know, Sloan," Rufe said, trying to keep his voice calm, "I shore would like to buy that fancy buckskin jacket you've got on. I've been lookin' for just something like that. It looks like my size too."

The saddler stopped sewing and looked up. A puzzled expression framed his question.

"What do you want this one for? I can make you one just like it if you come back in a day or two."

Rufe interrupted him impatiently.

"I won't be around again. I'll pay you a good price."

Rufe dug in his pocket and pulled out a pouch of coins. He tossed it on the table. He went tense as he watched for any false move on the saddler's part. He saw none. Wimpy resumed sewing. Then he dropped his awl and swore as it unthreaded. Rufe squinted and his heart

thumped wildly as he watched the saddler attempt to thread the needle again. Wimpy's hands were shaking and the thick thread missed the eye of the awl again and again. Strange actions for an experienced saddler, Rufe thought. The blood in his throat pressured as he sensed a showdown approaching. His hand strayed to the .44 at his thigh. But he knew the doubt was still playing tricks with his mind. He'd have to see the scar. And if Wimpy Sloan was the McLaren who had helped put him behind bars, he wouldn't show it without a fight!

Rufe edged closer to the work bench. "Sloan," he said, "I'm asking you again. Do you want to sell me that jacket?"

Wimpy finally stabbed the thread through the needle's eye and began to stitch furiously. He didn't look up as he answered.

"It seems loco to me . . . you wantin' to buy this jacket. I'm not sellin'. Put yore money away."

Rufe's jaws worked savagely but no words came out. His gun hand was twitching for action. He was almost sure now this was his man. Still, he had to see the final proof . . . or its equal.

Rufe backed lightly away from the rack. His next words could bring sudden death to either one of them.

"Sloan," Rufe said hoarsely, "I'm askin' you to take off that jacket!"

For a moment, the saddler kept on with the stitching, the right hand rising and falling as before. The movement almost hypnotized Rufe. Then the hand failed to come up in its split-second action. And, in that second, Rufe knew the saddler's gun would arc up blazing . . . instead of the awl! He was ready for it. His own gun roared at his side. Wimpy's face assumed a tortured look, then blanked as his gun clattered to the floor. His body sagged across the saddle he had been working on.

Rufe moved swiftly. It was late now

but he knew people must have heard the blasts. He found a back door and raced out into the darkness. He hit the board walk pounding. He heard the jingling boot steps behind. Quickly, he turned and entered the saddler's shop again, like an alarmed citizen who had just heard shots. The sheriff pushed on in ahead of him and examined the body slumped in death. Then he turned to Rufe.

"You see anything of the hombre who did this?" he shot at him.

"No, sheriff, I didn't. I was just walking by when I heard the shots . . . thought I'd better see if I could help."

"What's yore handle, stranger?" the sheriff asked.

"Potter, Rufe Potter."

THE sheriff moved behind the work bench, squinting. Then he booted something on the floor. He stooped and picked up a piece of dressed cowhide. The awl hung from it by the thread. Raising the wick in the lamp, the sheriff peered at a mass of stitches.

"You never saw this man before?"

"That's right, sheriff. I was walking by when I . . ."

The sheriff's Colt appeared in a flashing half-arc of speed . . . settled on Potter's mid-section.

"Potter," growled the sheriff, "I'm arresting you for the murder of Wimpy Sloan here! A note stitched by a man just before he's murdered is good enough for me." He tossed the leather to the bewildered Rufe.

Rufe felt the blood drain out of his face as he read the cleverly stitched note.

Get Rufe Potter

Rufe tried for his gun but someone behind him had already removed it. He felt a gut-wrenching helplessness.

"Potter," the sheriff intoned, "I guess old Wimpy would be glad to know that we'll weave them stitches of his into a stout rope that'll swing you high!"





HIGH-WHEEL IT TO HELL

By BILL HEUMAN

INSTEAD OF GOING DIRECTLY to Death Valley on the train, Grady Carr got off at Coroner Junction, thirty miles north of Mojave, the edge of the Valley. He went the remainder of the distance on horseback, deliberately skirting the town and moving out along the ridges on the west edge of the Valley.

He was abreast one of the fixed camps along the borax road which led from the

refining plants out to Mojave and the railroad. The road ran as straight as an arrow across the alkali flats and salt marshes, passing between huge mountains of white sand which reflected the heat, sending it in waves which rolled up toward the ridges.

Extending down from the ridges were long files of boulders swept down by cloudbursts from the mountains. Some



Grady Carr was Carr Borax . . . or was he? Could one gun-handly gent take over that high-wagon, Death Valley outfit and make it roll? Or had he inherited a one-way ticket to a sudden grave?

mesquite trees sprouted among the boulders. A kangaroo rat scurried from one rock to another, and a lone crow flapped dismally over the salt marsh just below.

Grady Carr rubbed his jaw reflectively as he bounced in the saddle, looking down toward the station. He'd been in dead and hot places before, but nothing to compare with this. A man on the train had stated emphatically that it was 'the pit o' hell',

and Grady was now willing to second that.

The heat lifting up from the Valley floor was suffocating; dry, searing waves of it which parched the lips, cracking them until the blood started to flow. The reflection of the sun on the white sand and the silvery marshes was blinding to the eyes. There was a kind of heat mist hanging over the dried salt marsh, and the huge black crow almost seemed suspended

motionless in the shimmering air.

Rolling a cigarette, Grady lighted it and then turned the chestnut horse down the incline toward the station a quarter of a mile away.

A borax outfit had come in a few minutes before, and the attendants were watering the mules, leading them up to the water hole two at a time. There were ten teams, twenty mules to the outfit, hauling the huge double wagons and the smaller water tank on wheels which made up the outfit.

At the first sight of them Grady had stared in amazement. Farther north he'd heard rumors of this new equipment being used to haul borax out of the Valley. The wagons were immense—the largest ever constructed for hauling purposes—the beds sixteen feet long, four feet wide and six feet deep, the hind wheels seven feet high. The double wagons were capable of hauling forty-five thousand pounds of borax from the refining plants at one trip.

Those were the stories farther north, and Grady figured the profits on one trip alone. It was said to cost one cent a pound to haul the borax from the Valley, and it was sold by the carload at ten cents! The huge profits in the trade were supposed to be drawing unscrupulous operators into the Valley. Already, Grady had heard there were two other companies in the Valley rivaling the big Carr Borax Company, owned by his uncle, deceased. The outfits were supposed to be cutting each other's throats in the bitter battle to snake borax out of the Valley to the railroad.

IT WAS for this reason Grady had entered Death Valley in the guise of a stray rider, drifting down from the north, rather than as the new owner of the powerful Carr Borax, willed to him by his uncle, his only living relative. He wanted to have a look at the outfit before he entered Mojave and took control. Looking at it as a drifting rider he would undoubtedly see more than he would as head of the company with his visits to the various posts heralded hours or days in advance.

He was within fifty yards of the station

and the attendants and drivers hadn't noticed him as yet. There were four of them—two coming in with the outfit, handling the wagons and the teams, and the other two attendants at the station. They were very intent on what they were doing, and this was a strange thing because watering mules is not too interesting a business.

Grady spotted the words, "Carr Borax Company" inscribed on the sides of the two big wagons standing in the baking sun. These were his wagons and this was his station. He rode up leisurely, smoking the cigarette, and he was within twenty-five yards of the group at the water hole before he was spotted.

A squat man with a walrus mustache and bleary blue eyes straightened up, glanced in his direction, swore, and jerked out his six-gun. He held it level on Grady as the man on the chestnut horse rode toward him.

Grady smiled at them, but his gray eyes were crinkled at the corners. He'd taken off the short coat he'd worn on the train and he'd tied it to the back of his saddle. He was carrying a Colt six-gun on his right hip, but he made no attempt to go for it when the man with the mustache drew on him.

He called softly, "Don't get excited, boys."

The four men stared at him. One of the drivers, a tall, slim man with a broken beak of a nose had his hand on his gun, also, but he didn't take it out of the holster.

He snapped sourly, "What in hell you want, Buck?"

Grady had kept coming. He stopped the chestnut ten yards away and stepped out of the saddle. He said, "It's a hot country. I could stand a drink of water."

They looked at him suspiciously. The squat man was moistening his lips nervously. He jerked his head toward the stone hut where there was a bucket standing on a bench in the shade.

He snapped, "Take it an' get the hell out—quick."

Grady looked at him curiously. The slim man with the broken nose opened his mouth as if to say something, but the short man shut him up with a look. It

was obvious that they wanted him to get his drink and go on his way quickly. They didn't even want to question him because that would take time, even though they had a right to be curious. A man didn't ride around in Death Valley without water bag or canteen, and Grady had neither.

Smiling faintly, Grady nodded and walked up toward the hut. He noticed the corral in the rear, shaded by a few scrawny mesquite trees, a half dozen mules standing inside, swishing their tails idly. This was obviously not a change station where fresh mules were put into the traces. The animals were watered here for the final run into Mojave, and the attendants kept a few animals in the corrals as replacements for those that were done in or injured on the road.

The water tasted of alkali, but it was good and it was cold. Deliberately, Grady took his time. When he turned around and came back the four men were still watching him grimly. They'd been watering the first two mules taken from the chain. The animals were standing near the water hole, shaking their heads a little, snorting, as if anxious to get back to the water. The four men had made no attempt to water the other eighteen animals, and it was apparent that they were waiting for Grady to go on his way.

Grady said carelessly, "Mind if I water my horse, boys?"

The squat man's eyes flickered, and the jaw of one of the other men drooped perceptibly.

"Plenty o' water in Mojave—sixteen miles north," the squat man growled. "We're short."

It was a lie. The water hole here was a big one, and if they could water twenty mules at it, one additional horse wouldn't matter a great deal. Grady felt a little faint stirring of curiosity. He looked down at the hole, at the blackish water in it, and then back at the four men.

"You seen enough?" the tall man with the broken nose rasped. "Now get the hell out before you get a bullet through you."

The other two men of this foursome were watching the two mules avidly now as if expecting something. One man was

swallowing nervously; the other's eyes were popping.

IT WAS then that it happened. One of the mules let out a sudden loud snort and started to kick savagely. The four men scrambled out of the way as the maddened animal lashed out with its hoofs, fell to the ground, scrambled up and started kicking and running.

The kicking was over in a matter of seconds, and then the animal was down on the ground, obviously in tremendous pain, going through convulsions.

The five men watched in silence, and it was Grady Carr who made the first move. His face set tight, thin lips drawn across his teeth, he slipped the Colt gun from the holster, walked up to the animal, held the muzzle of the gun against the head, and squeezed the trigger.

The mule stopped kicking. Grady ejected the spent cartridge. The four were watching him now, waiting to see what he had to say.

"Poison?" Grady asked quietly.

"You're damned lucky you didn't drink out o' that hole," the man with the mustache growled. "Reckon we'll have to close up this station or find another water hole."

"They go bad overnight?" Grady asked him slowly. He glanced back at the bucket from which he'd just drunk. The water in that bucket had not been poisonous or he'd have started to feel the effects now.

"Never can tell about water holes in this country," the short man muttered. "Some of 'em git bad for no damn reason at all."

Grady looked at the dead mule, beginning to stiffen now. He was positive these men had known the mule was drinking poisonous water; they'd watched it drink and they knew it was going to die. The second animal evidently had not started to drink as yet, or if so had not taken enough water to do any damage.

"You're askin' a hell of a lot o' questions for a stranger," the short man observed. "The next one might get you into trouble."

"Reckon I'll risk it," Grady said flatly.

"Who do you work for?"

The short man with the mustache looked as if he were going to argue the point and make an issue out of it, but one of the other men said, "Carr Borax."

"You did," Grady told him. "You're through now. Be off these premises in twenty-four hours. I'm sending another crew out from Mojave to take in this outfit."

The four men stared at him, and one of them gulped, "George Carr's nephew, takin' over the company."

Grady went on quietly, "If I find another of these mules dead, I'll have you boys tracked down if it takes every penny I have."

He walked back to the chestnut horse, climbed into the saddle, and swung down the road toward Mojave, the four men watching him without a word. He was sure he had the solution to this affair. The four Carr employees had been 'reached' with money from one of the other borax operators in the Valley. They'd intended to poison the mules, hold up this big cargo of borax, and then claim that the job was done by riders from the other outfits.

Possibly, they had been working against Carr Borax for a long time; possibly, there were others who had been accepting Uncle George's money and at the same time taking orders from Carr Borax's rivals.

Grady Carr's jaws were set tight as he rode through the boiling heat of Death Valley. Operating his own stage line in Wyoming, he'd had his troubles with opposition lines battling for the juicy government contracts. There had been bitter disputes, fighting, and occasionally underhanded tactics, but never had they stooped to poisoning innocent animals.

II

GRADY RODE INTO MOJAVE AT four o'clock that afternoon, the thing still riding him, his gray eyes hard. The town, lying on the edge of the Valley, was not large. The heat hung heavy in the streets and few people moved about. There were enough saloons and gambling houses

along the main street to accommodate quite a few patrons, probably mostly borax workers, but the heat kept them off the streets at this hour.

The chestnut kicked up alkali dust as Grady rode down the middle of the road, watching the signs on the building. A bartender came out of one of the saloons, looked at him, spat in the road, and then went under the shade of his porch roof.

Carr Borax occupied a two-story building at the main intersection. Grady dismounted in front of the door and stepped into the dark, cool interior.

A thin-faced, red-haired clerk behind the counter looked at him distastefully and snapped, "Anything I can do for you, mister?"

Grady leaned on the counter. He was dusty from riding now, and he needed a shave. He was not in a good mood to begin with.

He said tersely, "You can watch your damned tongue, my friend, if you want to hold your job."

The clerk blinked and then swallowed the lump in his throat. "Mr. Carr?" he mumbled. "You—you weren't on the train this morning."

"I came in on horseback," Grady told him grimly. "Mr. Ames in?" Jeffrey Ames was the Carr Borax general superintendent. He was the man Uncle George's lawyer had asked Grady to see when he came to Mojave.

A chunky white-haired man stood in the doorway, smiling. He came forward, big hand extended across the counter. It was stuffy hot in the office, but this man looked cool. The white, silken hair was deceiving. He was still a comparatively young man, possibly a few years older than Grady himself.

His handshake was warm, friendly. He had brown eyes in odd contrast to the color of his hair. He was slightly shorter than Grady, but heavier in the body and in the face, although none of it was fat. He said,

"We've been waiting for you, Mr. Carr. I was down at the station when the train came in. I had your wire."

Grady nodded. "Figured I'd have a look at the Valley before I came to Mo-

jave," he explained. "I got off at Coroner Junction and came the rest of the way on horseback. Train was as hot as hell anyway."

He wondered how this weak explanation would go with Jeffrey Ames. The chunky man's brown eyes flickered, but that was all.

"Come inside, Mr. Carr. I'll have Edson over here this evening when it's cool. We'll go over all the necessary papers with him."

Edson was the Carr Borax attorney, the man with whom Grady had exchanged letters after the will of George Carr became public.

Ames closed the door of the inner office behind him, waved Grady to a leather, upholstered chair, and said carelessly, "What do you think of the Valley, Mr. Carr?"

Grady took a cigar from the box Ames pushed across the desk toward him. He bit off the end before replying, and then he said coolly,

"Hell of a nice place for rattlesnakes." When Jeffrey Ames laughed, he added, "I found four of them at your last station in to Mojave."

The smile left Ames' face. He leaned forward a little in his chair and he said, "Our No. 10 station, Horne and Seeley in charge. What happened?"

"They were poisoning mules," Grady told him. "I fired both of them and also the two drivers bringing in that load which was due in here this afternoon."

THE white-haired man stood up, the anger gleaming in his brown eyes. He said tersely, "Rantner bribed them. I was afraid of that. We lost half a dozen mules the other day up at our No. 4 station. We thought then that the water holes actually had become polluted. I'm glad you spotted that, Mr. Carr."

Grady watched him walk toward the door and call to the red-headed clerk, "Sanders, send two drivers out to No. 10 to bring in Caldwell and Logan's outfit. Send two men out to No. 10 to take over the station. Horne and Seeley are through."

It was the tone of voice which caught

Grady's ear more than the things the white-haired man said. Jeffrey Ames had a soft voice, a silken voice, but there was iron behind it. The general superintendent of Carr Borax could get pretty tough if he wanted to. Grady Carr was sure of that.

Ames came back to the desk, shaking his head grimly. He said, "Lace Rantner runs the new Consolidated Borax Company in the Valley. He's out to break us if he can. In this business time is the greatest factor. We have to race the borax to the railhead to get the best price for it. A few teams of mules poisoned on the road can make us hours or a whole day behind in our schedule. Rantner knows that. He's been trying to reach our drivers and station attendants for a long time."

Grady puffed on the cigar and looked at the floor. He said, "Any other company in the Valley?"

"Crescent Borax, run by a young Tom Halliday and his sister," Ames said carelessly. "It's a jerk water outfit. Halliday's sore at us because we won't sign a contract with him to use our graded road into the Valley. He's running himself into bankruptcy, trying to build his own road."

Grady looked thoughtful. He said, "It'd be a damn fool business for us to let a competitor use our road into the Valley, wouldn't it? We'd be cutting our own throats."

Ames pursed his lips and looked at his cigar. "Not necessarily so," he stated. "Your uncle signed a contract with Lace Rantner a year ago. Consolidated Borax takes every pound of the stuff out of Death Valley over Carr Borax Road—the only graded road in or out of the Valley."

Grady's eyes widened and he sat up in the chair. He said quietly, "Why would he do that?"

"The concession," Ames explained, "is worth almost as much to us as the borax we refine and haul out of the Valley. Rantner has been paying us three cents on the pound for every pound of borax hauled over our road. Of course he has his own stations."

Grady smiled coldly, "So Uncle George

was willing to accept a little competition at that price," he said. "Why did he cut out Crescent if he signed with Consolidated?"

Ames shrugged. "Young Halliday claims your uncle was getting ready to sign with him also when he died. There was nothing in writing and I haven't thought it profitable to let another competitor in the field. Two companies are plenty."

"Even though one is poisoning the other's mules," Grady said softly. This thing didn't strike him as ringing true. He'd known Uncle George Carr as a shrewd business man. He could see the uncle signing a contract with Lace Rantner of Consolidated at a lucrative profit for himself, but he would, also, have signed a contract with young Halliday at the same terms if he could. The road was there, and it had undoubtedly cost a small fortune to construct over the shifting sands of the desert. Uncle George would want to get his money back on the road, and another concession would not bring too much competition to the field. There was plenty of borax in Death Valley, and the terrific demand of the outside world would keep the price up.

Jeffrey Ames had mentioned the element of time in racing the borax from the refining plant to the railhead, but even here the competition amounted to only a cent or so difference in the price paid by the buyers.

Ames said, "We've had our little troubles with Rantner in the past, but nothing really serious. His drivers have had fights with our drivers in Mojave Saloons. There have been races into Mojave, and some pretty stiff betting on the outcome, and some pretty hard words."

"And now poisoned mules," Grady Carr said. "What happens now, Mr. Ames?"

Jeffrey Ames looked at him. He said, "It's your company, Mr. Carr." He added, "I don't think your uncle would like to lose that three cents on the pound Consolidated is paying us to use our road."

"No mules had been poisoned then," Grady stated.

Ames shrugged. "I'm sure Rantner will

pay for the mules," he said almost carelessly. "We still don't have any proof that he is behind the poisoning. I think he is and you think he is. A court of law might require more evidence."

Grady looked at the man steadily. "Rantner will pay for the mules?" he repeated, his eyes seeming to change color. "Mr. Ames, where I come from you don't pay for poisoned mules with money."

The white-haired man looked at him through a cloud of blue cigar smoke. He grinned then and said, "You need a drink Mr. Carr. Step next door with me."

GRADY followed him out of the office and into the saloon which adjoined the Carr Borax building. It was fairly cool inside, and empty at this hour. The bartender slid two glasses of cold beer across the counter at them, and then Grady heard the bat-wing doors squeak as someone came in behind him.

A huge figure of a man stepped up to the bar on the other side of Jeffrey Ames. He had reddish hair, a beak of a nose, bent over to the right, steel blue eyes. The backs of his tremendous hands as they rested on the bar wood were covered with fuzzy red hair, the color of the hair on his head.

The bartender said, "Afternoon, Mr. Rantner."

Rantner grinned at Ames and Grady in the bar mirror. He said, "Drinks on me, gentlemen."

Grady set his glass down on the bar. He said quietly, "Not mine, mister."

Rantner turned to look at him. Ames straightened up and stepped back a half step from the bar so that they could see each other past him.

Ames' round face was expressionless. He said, "Mr. Carr—Mr. Rantner of Consolidated Borax."

Grady could see from the expression on Rantner's broad face that the borax operator had known he was meeting the new head of Carr Borax. Undoubtedly, Rantner had been watching from the window of his own office, somewhere in town, and when he'd seen the two enter the saloon he'd come down to make himself known.

Rantner was still smiling as he looked at Grady, but his flinty eyes were harder than ever. He said coolly, "For a stranger, Mr. Carr, who should be making friends in this town, you're going about it in the wrong way."

"I'm still paying for my own drink," Grady said.

"Why?" Rantner wanted to know. "Your uncle and I always did business together."

"Maybe," Grady told him, "you weren't a mule poisoner then, Mr. Rantner."

Lace Rantner's big frame stiffened at the bar. He looked at Ames and then at Grady again. He said softly, "Now who's been poisoning your mules, Mr. Carr?"

"We found four of our boys polluting the water hole at No. 10 camp," Jeffrey Ames said flatly. "Mr. Carr is of the opinion your money bought off our help, Rantner."

"Mr. Carr could be damned wrong," Rantner grated.

"How many outfits do you have up in the Valley?" Grady asked.

The big man moistened his lips. "Two," he said, "at the refining plant. Why?"

"Don't send any more up," Grady told him. "Consolidated is through using our road."

"We have a contract," Rantner roared. "You'll live up to it."

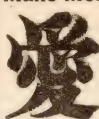
"I don't like your business tactics," Grady told him. "I'm running every Consolidated wagon off our road from now on. Get those two outfits back to Mojave and don't send any more out."

The bartender was listening, open-mouthed. Jeffrey Ames had stepped back a full step so that Grady and Rantner could see each other clearly. He was standing with his thumbs hooked in the pockets of his vest, a cigar jutting from his mouth. Rantner took a step past him until he was standing directly in front of Grady.

The big man's face was twisted in rage. He said tersely, "You're trying to put me out of business, Mr. Carr. You can't do it."

"Then build your own road into the Valley," Grady told him. He started to

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walk away, but Lace Rantner caught him by the shirt front and whipped him back up against the bar.

The big man's face was red and he was breathing heavily. He snarled, "You'll live up to that contract, Carr."

Grady was six feet tall and one hundred and ninety pounds, himself, even though Rantner was easily forty pounds the heavier man. Grasping Rantner's wrist, Grady wrenched the hand away from his shirt. He was still fighting mad from the scene up at No. 10 camp, and the prospects of a rough and tumble battle here were not entirely repugnant.

"I don't like a man putting his hands on me, Rantner. Don't try it again."

THE giant didn't touch him. He just laughed, and it was enough. Grady hit him right in the mouth with a right hand swing, nearly driving Rantner to his knees.

The power behind the blow seemed to amaze Rantner, but he recovered quickly and lunged in, driving pile-driver blows in the direction of Grady's body.

Coolly, Grady slipped away from him, chopped Rantner on the side of the head with his left fist, and then smashed him in the stomach with his right.

Rantner gasped. He got his arms around Grady's body, wrenched him up against the bar, and then loosened one arm to slam Grady on the side of the face. He was in an excellent position to bring his big knee into Grady's crotch, and Grady half-expected the kick. It never came. And Rantner was not using his extra weight to bend Grady's back over the bar, which he could have easily done. He was fighting with his fists—fighting cleanly!

Grady felt blood trickling down his cheek when he broke out of the clinch. Rantner's hard fist had hurt him, but he was smiling a little as he stepped in to meet the big man's next rush. He hit Rantner in the face twice, and then took another blow on the jaw which knocked him off his feet.

It was again Rantner's opportunity to pile on top of him when he was down and finish the fight then and there, but

Rantner didn't do it. He stood back, waiting for Grady to get up, blood on his mouth, his right eye swelling from one of Grady's blows.

"I can kill a man your size," Rantner panted. "Now give it up, Carr."

"Not today," Grady chuckled. He was up again, tearing in, surprising Rantner by the speed with which he came off the floor. He hit the big man in the stomach again, taking most of the wind out of him.

When Rantner's head went down, Grady slammed six punches into the face and body, knocking Rantner to his knees. Rantner got up without any haste, like a big bear who knew he was in a fight and had plenty of time to go through with it.

Grady hit him on the jaw, and Rantner came back and nearly knocked Grady down with a swinging right hand blow to the chin.

They stood there, eyeing each other, and Jeffrey Ames said, "Only a pair of damned fools would go on with this thing. You're not ignorant bull-whackers."

Grady smiled. He tasted blood in his mouth. There was more blood, dripping down from his cut cheekbone. Rantner's right eye was nearly closed. He glared out of the other one.

"Ames is right. I could go on and kill you, Carr, but that wouldn't open that road for me."

"That's right, Rantner," Grady smiled. "It wouldn't." He was beginning to like this big man who fought so cleanly.

"Your uncle was a man of his word," Lace Rantner said grimly. "He never would have gone back on that contract. I'm damned sorry you ever came to the Valley, Carr."

"Keep your wagons off my road," Grady said.

Rantner grinned coldly. "Keep them off," he repeated slowly. "Watch them roll Carr." He went out into the street, and the bartender came around to pick up several chairs they'd knocked over in the tussle.

JEFFREY AMES returned to his glass of beer on the counter. He said, "He's tough, Carr. He'll fight you."

Grady nodded absently. "I expect a fight," he stated. "I'm not running from it."

"You have the law on your side," Ames pointed out, "but there's not a hell of a lot of law in this town as yet. The tough man usually wins."

"Then we'll be tough," Grady told him. "How many men do we have in our wagon yard?"

"About twenty," Ames said. "Most of our employees are on the road at stations."

"Send fifteen men up to our No. 10 station," Grady told him. "Set up a road block and turn back every Consolidated wagon leaving Mojave."

Ames whistled. "That might mean guns," he pointed out.

Grady shook his head. "I don't think Rantner will go that far," he stated. "When he sees we mean business he'll back down."

Ames shrugged and looked down at his beer glass. "Anything else?" he asked.

"We're opening up the road to young Halliday and his Crescent outfit. I'm going over to see him now."

Jeffrey Ames looked up. He said, "You're sure you're playing the right card?"

"I'll find out," Grady smiled. He walked toward the door, Ames following him, and he stood under the porch watching a borax outfit rolling by. It was one of Consolidated's double wagons, heavily loaded, just coming in from the Valley and headed for the railroad depot.

Ames said, "I'd be careful in this town, Carr, from now on. It would be to the advantage of Consolidated to get you out of the way. You'll break Rantner on these terms. He's not in a position to build his own road, and the day he stops running borax out of the Valley he starts to go into the red."

Grady nodded absently. He wasn't worried about Lace Rantner; he wasn't worried about a bullet in the back from a man who wouldn't take advantage of him when he was down in a saloon brawl. He was also sure about another thing. Rantner hadn't had the Carr mules poisoned.



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Ames went back to the office and Grady strolled down the street toward the office of Crescent Borax. He was conscious of the fact that Jeffrey Ames was watching him from the office door as he walked under the wooden awnings and crossed the street at the next intersection.

III

THE CRESCENT OFFICE WAS considerably smaller than the Carr office. Grady had to go up a rickety staircase to a second floor loft. It was terrifically hot on this second floor, but the girl behind the desk seemed very cool. She was dressed in white, dark-hair, slender, her skin tanned from the hot sun of the Valley, and a girl with tanned skin was a rarity. Grady Carr didn't remember ever seeing one before.

The girl's eyes were brown, quiet, friendly. She said, "What can I do for you, sir?"

It was then that Grady remembered young Tom Halliday was supposed to be in business with his sister. He'd forgotten about the sister.

"The name's Carr," Grady said. "I'm the new owner of Carr Borax." He watched the reaction on her face.

Miss Halliday smiled faintly. She said, "I'm sure my brother will be glad to see you, Mr. Carr."

Tom Halliday came through the door from another room. He was a tall young man, blond-haired, good-looking, a kind of harassed expression on his face now. He looked at Grady expectantly, and then extended his hand.

"Have a seat, Mr. Carr," he said quietly. "Glad you dropped in. This town has been waiting for you."

Grady didn't waste any time. He said casually, "Halliday, Carr Borax is prepared to open our road to you at the same rate we charge Consolidated. You ready to do business with us?"

Tom Halliday gasped. He stared at his sister and then back at Grady, a big grin stealing across his face.

"You—you mean it?" he cried.

"We can sign the papers in ten minutes," Grady told him, "and you can start run-

ning your wagons five minutes after that."

Halliday blinked. He had his sister's mouth, but his eyes were blue. He said, "What caused the change in policy, Mr. Carr? I couldn't even get near Ames with a proposition."

"From now on," Grady told him, "there's fair trade in the Valley. I believe that was the way my uncle wanted it. We'll all make plenty of money if we don't get greedy."

Miss Halliday was looking at him approvingly, and Grady reddened a little. He said somewhat gruffly, "Come over to my office, Halliday, and we'll straighten this thing out for you."

In thirty minutes, with the help of Edson, the company attorney, they had the paper drawn up, and Grady was signing it. Jeffrey Ames sat behind his desk, smoking a cigar, watching them.

He said to Halliday, "Policies change, Mr. Halliday. I wasn't putting myself out on a limb until Mr. Carr turned up. You can see my position."

Tom Halliday nodded, but Grady could see that he wasn't too much impressed with Ames' explanation of his refusal to do business with the small Crescent Company.

Going out to eat that night, after registering at the hotel, Grady ran across Eve Halliday. The girl stopped him with a warm smile.

"I suppose you realize what this means to us, Mr. Carr. We've invested a lot of money in the company with the understanding that your uncle would let us use the road the same as Consolidated. When Mr. Ames refused to sign the contract with us we were very much worried."

"It's a business proposition," Grady said. "We both stand to profit on the deal."

"Mr. Ames didn't look at it that way," Miss Halliday stated. "I wonder why."

Grady shrugged. "Reckon he was looking after the best interests of the company," he said. He was embarrassed having this girl grateful to him, and he was glad when he was able to get away.

HE saw the first Crescent Company wagons pulling out of Mojave that evening, heading into the Valley. They were new wagons, never having been used

before; the ten spans of mules were as chipper as young colts, anxious to run.

A man on the porch of the saloon where Grady was standing, said enthusiastically, "That young Halliday will break the record for the run in and back. He's a hustler."

Halliday wasn't driving the teams. The company had two men up on the seat, and these men, Grady had heard, were taking the empties all the way to the refining plants in the valley, a ten day's trip.

It was almost dusk when the wagons pulled out, and it was nearly midnight when the story came in of the raid on Crescent wagons five miles out of Mojave.

Grady was sitting in on a card game with Ames, Edson, the lawyer, and two friends of Ames' when a rider tumbled into the saloon, his face aghast. He was a Carr Borax employee and he made his way to Grady's table, his mouth working as he pushed between the tables.

Ames said quickly, "What's happened, George?"

"I found two wagons overturned right off the Moonlight Marsh," the man panted. "Both of 'em burnin', mules run off, one of 'em drivers shot dead."

Jeffrey Ames put both hands on the table and looked at Grady. "The new Crescent wagons. This will just about ruin young Halliday. Those wagons cost nearly a thousand apiece, and the mules were worth a small fortune. Crescent had but two outfits to put on the road to begin with."

"Who did it?" Grady snapped.

"I might ask you that question, Mr. Carr," someone said from the doorway.

Grady spun around and looked into the white face of young Tom Halliday. The Crescent Company owner came in slowly, trembling with rage. He said tersely, "I'm asking Carr Borax who smashed up my outfit?"

"You're excited," Ames said. "Calm down before you say something you'll be sorry for."

Young Halliday was looking straight at Grady. He said grimly, "You let me go on that road with my wagons so that you could smash me up!"

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"I don't operate that way," Grady said. "Did this bunch leave any clues? What happened to your other driver?"

"Second chap was shot up, too," the man who had brought the news told him. "He claims they rushed out o' the Marsh and started shootin' right off—about ten o' 'em. He was hit an' he don't remember much after that. The mules were stampered off in the direction o' the Skeletons after they were unhooked from the chain. The wagons an' the water tank were rolled off the road and set on fire."

"You couldn't get at me," Tom Halliday choked, "while I was in town. You let me get my equipment out of town and then you smashed me." He had a gun inside his coat and he intended to bring it out. Grady could see the intentions in his eyes. He was sitting in the chair facing Halliday across the table. Gripping the table with both hands, he was ready to overthrow it and drive it into Halliday's stomach the moment the gun came into the clear. He carried his own gun inside his coat, but he didn't want to be forced to use it on the younger man.

"Halliday," Grady said, "get control of yourself."

"Damn you," Tom Halliday snarled, "you're trying to get control of the whole Valley and run everybody else out. I should have seen through your cheap game."

HE had his hand inside the coat now, but he never had a chance to bring the gun out. A giant of a man detached himself from the crowd which had started to gather around the table. The giant pinned Halliday's arms at his sides.

"Halliday, don't be a damned fool. That's just what they're lookin' for, a chance to shoot you down." The man holding Halliday was Lace Rantner. He was looking straight at Grady.

"Carr, don't try to smash up my outfits like that. You'll never leave this country alive."

"I'm not smashing any outfits," Grady said flatly.

"You're trying to run me out of the Valley," Rantner told him, "just as you're trying to ruin this young fellow. You

don't want any competition."

Grady stood up. He said grimly. "Instead of wasting time here, why don't you get out and try to track down those mules? You'll find the crowd you're looking for with the mules."

Lace Rantner laughed jeeringly. "You know damned well you can't follow anything once it gets up over the ridges, an' them mules are well over the ridges by now. It's all stone up there. They'll be leavin' as much sign as a bird."

Grady Carr bit his lips. He looked at Tom Halliday and he said quietly, "What makes you think our company was behind this raid on your outfit?"

"Who stands to gain the most by having me broken?" Halliday demanded.

"That's not proof," Jeffrey Ames said. "You'll need a hell of a lot more than that, Halliday, in a court room."

"It's enough for me right here," Halliday said slowly. "I have every penny in the world thrown into Crescent Borax. I'm not going down without a fight."

Lace Rantner said, "I understand, Carr, that you threw a road block across the road up at your No. 10 station."

"That's right," Grady nodded. "You had my warning this afternoon, Rantner."

"Road block?" Halliday muttered.

"You didn't know it," Lace Rantner said bitterly, "but before he signed a contract with you, he tore up the one I signed with his uncle. Consolidated wagons can't go into the Valley over the Carr road." He said to Grady, "I'm going through that block in the morning, Carr, and I don't want anybody to try to stop me."

"You'll be stopped," Grady assured him.

"Not short of hell," Rantner retorted.

Grady saw the contempt in Tom Halliday's eyes when this revelation came out. The young man was positive now that he'd been right in accusing Carr Borax of attempting to wreck him.

Without a word, Halliday turned on his heel and walked out of the saloon. Lace Rantner went after him.

Grady lighted a cigarette, tossed away the match, and then went out on the porch, Ames following him. They stood there for a few moments saying nothing.

Grady said finally, "Who did it, Ames?"

Jeffrey Ames laughed. "Take one guess," he said. "It wasn't us. Who else wouldn't want to see another operator in the field?"

"Rantner," Grady said.

Ames nodded. "He's playing up to young Halliday, pretending he's on his side, but his riders smashed up Crescent wagons tonight."

"And he'll try to smash through us tomorrow morning," Grady said thoughtfully. "I'm thinking he'll get Halliday's crew to come down with him."

"He wants a monopoly in the Valley," Ames pointed out. "If he can break us, he'll kick Halliday out, and then control the amount of borax coming out of the Valley. He can set his own price on the stuff, also."

Grady tossed his cigarette out into the road. He said, "Get every available man out to that road block in the morning, Ames. We'll see how far Rantner will go."

"He won't go far," Ames murmured, and there was satisfaction in his voice.

IV

WHEN THE CARR BORAX superintendent left, Grady stood for some time on the porch of the saloon. The town was crowded now because at this hour some coolness came to the desert. The big borax boom had attracted hundreds of men to the vicinity. Many of them were employed by the three companies in operation; others were just drifting, attracted by the sound of big money, idly hoping to garner some of it for themselves.

The saloons along the main street were jammed. Men stood in groups on the walks and on the porches, and the talk was always borax—new methods of snaking it out of the valley, conjecture as to the ultimate price for the stuff, conjecture, too, as to who would eventually control Death Valley, the 'valley of hell'.

There were riders moving along the street, also, some borax workers just coming in to town for a little spree after weeks or months in the terrific heat of the Valley.

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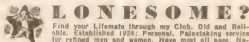
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A twenty-mule borax outfit was coming in from the Valley road, the ten teams of mules rattling the heavy chains, the enormous wagon wheels rumbling as the heavily-loaded wagons hove into view.

Grady recognized them as the two wagons he'd seen at his own No. 10 station that afternoon. Two new men were up on the seat—the two drivers Ames had sent out to relieve the pair Grady had fired for poisoning the mules.

The tandem outfit rolled past, leaving a cloud of thin dust in the air. A half dozen loose riders followed in the wake of the outfit, greeting its arrival with a scattering of shots from their six-guns. There was no particular reason for this, except that the men on horseback were in good spirits; they'd been drinking, and the arrival of the wagons could be construed as a reason for celebrating.

These riders galloped past through the haze of dust, their guns popping, and then one of them swooped in toward the saloon porch. Grady could see the brim of his hat flapping as he rode, but he couldn't see the man's face. This man was not swaying in the saddle from drunkenness as the others were.

In the faction of a second before the shot came, Grady Carr became aware of the danger. The indolence left him; his right hand was snaking down toward the gun on his hip when he saw the burst of orange flame from the gun of the street rider.

He was falling away toward his own left when the gun banged, but the bullet came close enough to cut the skin of his right cheek. He heard it slam into the wooden wall of the building, and the rider kept going, spurring his horse frantically, shooting past the slow-moving borax outfit.

Grady managed to get one shot off as he squatted on his knees, but the slug was wild. He did catch a glimpse of the horse as it pounded past the lighted area in front of the Buckaroo Saloon. The horse was a black with three white stockings.

Grady got up slowly, recognizing the futility of pursuit. The rider up ahead could dart into any one of a dozen different alleys, retrace his course through a

back street, and then stable his horse in a Mojave livery.

Grady was thinking of that as he got up. Men on the porch outside the saloon, who'd witnessed the attempted killing, came over to him anxiously.

One man said, "He get you, Mr. Carr?" "Not tonight," Grady smiled coldly. He reached a hand up to his cheek and it came away wet with blood. He held a handkerchief to the cut and went back into the saloon.

A bartender got him a bucket of water and he washed his face and the cut cheek in one of the back rooms.

He said to the bartender, "How many livery stables in this town, Jack?"

A cold anger was running through him again, the thing which had almost abated since he'd seen the mule poisoned that afternoon. It was up to the surface again now, and he knew he'd never sleep this night until he located that black horse with the three white stockings, and the killer who rode him.

The bartender thought for a moment. He said finally, "Five, Mr. Carr."

"Where are they?" Grady wanted to know. He took a pencil and paper from his pocket and wrote the names down and the locations. He realized it was only a chance, but it was not too long a chance. When a man came out of Death Valley, he went to Mojave because there was no other place to go. When he left Mojave he either went back into the Valley or left the vicinity altogether. Grady was gambling that his man was doing neither, that he'd left his horse in one of the five livery stables in town, and was walking around, mixing with the crowds in the street.

IT was one o'clock in the morning when he started to make the rounds of the livery stables. The first one was at the western edge of town, a small shack run by a man named Ed Murphy.

Grady stepped inside after walking down a narrow alley. Murphy wasn't around. The stable was empty, but there were about a dozen horses in the stalls. There was one black, but it didn't have white stockings.

The second and third stables proved

disappointments, also. The fourth stable Grady found locked up and the owner gone out of business. The fifth and the last was at the far eastern edge of town on the main street. It was the least likely place that he expected the killer to stable his horse, and he entered it with faint hope that he'd find the animal.

A stove-in old puncher sat on a rocking chair just inside the entrance, perusing a yellowed newspaper by the light of a lantern overhead.

Grady spotted a black horse at the far end of the stable. The animal was tossing its head, pawing the wooden floorboards. Grady walked down the aisle quickly, the old man watching him. When he reached the stall he stopped. The horse was black—all black, not a white spot on it.

Rubbing a hand across the flank, Grady found that it was dry. The horse had not been ridden recently. Frowning, Grady went back to the other end of the stable.

The old man said, "Lookin' for something, mister?"

"I didn't find it," Grady scowled.

"If it's a horse," the old man chuckled, "I know every damned animal in this town an' half of 'em in the Valley. They ride in here often enough."

Grady looked at him with quick interest. He said, "A black with three white stockings."

"Tom Halliday's black gelding," the old man told him promptly. "Left foreleg all black, an' the other three white up to the hock."

Grady stared at him. The description the old man had just given him fitted the killer's horse exactly. He tried to rub out the picture he had before him of young Tom Halliday, still white with rage, trying to conceal his identity behind an old slouch hat and clothes, riding up to shoot down the man who was trying to break him. It was not a good picture of Halliday. The young man was not a bushwhacker.

"Any other horse?" the old man asked proudly. "I kin spot 'em all, mister."

"That's all," Grady said. He handed the hostler a five dollar bill and left the stable. He was still in a daze as he came out on the street again. It was already past three

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o'clock in the morning, but he had to find out about this thing before he slept. He knew that he wouldn't sleep.

A bartender in one of the saloons told him where the Hallidays lived. Grady walked up the quiet side street, wondering what he would find. There was still the faint possibility that the fleeting glimpse he'd gotten of the horse ridden by the killer was not the one identified by the old hostler. He'd seen the horse at night, in the light from a saloon front; the animal had been moving fast at the time. He was positive though that if he got another look at the animal he would know definitely, and he could tell very easily if the horse had been ridden hard only recently.

He located the Halliday house in a fairly quiet section of town a full block off the main street. The house was not large, a one story structure, with a semblance of garden in the front, the only one of its kind in the town.

There was a shed in the back, which Tom Halliday undoubtedly used as a barn for his horse. This section of the town was asleep, and Grady walked around to the back of the house without being seen, and stepped into the shed. He could hear the horse inside, pawing the floor, and then he struck a match.

The animal was a black; it had three white stockings, and the left foreleg was all black. Touching the black horse's flank, Grady discovered that it was still damp. The horse had been ridden tonight. He had little doubt that it was the same horse ridden by the man who'd tried to shoot him down outside the Alhambra Saloon. Blowing out the match, Grady stepped out into the night again, his face tight.

He didn't see the slim figure standing less than a half dozen yards away from him until he heard her say, "May I ask what you are doing in that stable?"

Grady stared into the gun held on him by Eva Halliday. She was wearing a dark wrap around her slender body, and the gun was very steady in her hand. She'd undoubtedly heard or seen him from the window of the house, and had come out. It could have meant that Tom Halliday was not at home yet.

Grady said quietly, "I'd like a word with

your brother, Miss Halliday." He could see her face quite clearly in the light of the half moon and the stars. She smiled bitterly and she said, "Didn't you do him enough damage tonight, Mr. Carr?"

Grady pursed his lips. "A man rode up to me tonight while I was standing outside the Alhambra Saloon," he said slowly. "He tried to cut me down with a shot from his gun."

Eva Halliday waited, knowing there was more. She still held the gun on him, but the muzzle of it was drooping a little now.

"The man who tried to kill me," Grady went on tersely, "was riding this horse." When the girl still didn't say anything he added, "If I want to live in this town, I've got to know who is throwing lead at me from the dark."

"My brother wouldn't come at a man from the dark," Eva said proudly. "He'll face you in the front even if you kill him, and you probably will."

"I have no quarrel with your brother," Grady said. "Was he out with that horse tonight?"

"He's been out," the sister told him. "He doesn't usually take a horse when he goes into town."

"Is he in now?" Grady persisted.

"No," Eva Halliday said. There was contempt in her voice. "Are there any more questions, Mr. Carr?"

Grady shook his head. He said slowly, "I've never asked for trouble with your brother, and I don't want any now. I don't know whether he rode that horse tonight; but if he did you can tell him not to try it again."

The girl didn't say anything to that, and Grady turned and walked away. He went back to the hotel, trying to figure the thing out in his mind. He'd had his solution to the whole affair until the rider spurred out of the haze of dust behind the borax wagon and fired that shot. Now there was doubt again and he had to wait the thing out. He didn't like waiting.

V

HE HAD THREE HOURS SLEEP that night, and then he went over to the Carr wagon yards. Ames was already

there, lining up his men to take out to the road block at the No. 10 station.

Ames said, "I hear you had a little trouble last night, Carr."

"Too many people in this town throwing lead around," Grady observed. "I don't like it."

"Find out who shot at you?" Ames asked him.

"Not yet," Grady told him. "I aim to."

Ames grinned and rubbed a hand through his silky white hair. "They tell me," he said, "that Rantner is fixing to take his trial wagon out this morning. He's harnessing his mules in his yard right now."

"Any of Halliday's men with him?" Grady asked.

"Halliday's there," Ames said, "and a half dozen boys from his yard."

Grady frowned. He noticed that Ames had fifteen men ready to ride out. All of them were armed, grim-faced, knowing that their jobs might very well depend upon what happened out at the No. 10 station this morning. He liked the looks of them.

"We have another dozen men out at the camp," Ames said. "I gave orders for most of our station attendants to ride over and wait for us."

"That'll give us nearly thirty men," Grady said. "How many can Rantner bring out with him to break the block?"

"I understand he's been rounding up a mob of toughs from the town saloons," Ames said. "In addition to his own men and Halliday's he might have fifty when he comes out."

Grady thought about that, knowing that he couldn't let this fight take place, and wondering how he would stop it before he found out the things he had to know. He didn't want to see any of these Carr men hurt, and they were going to be hurt because Rantner was deadly serious about breaking the road blockade. Rantner, too, was fighting for survival.

The column of men rode through the Carr gates at six o'clock in the morning, the coolest time of the day. There was a curious brightness to the Valley when they entered it at this early hour. The sun had

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not yet come up over the range of scarred, barren mountains to the east, but the light was already in the sky. Kangaroo rats were scurrying about, and tiny, sand-colored lizards shot across the road in front of them.

The heat started to hit them just before they reached the No. 10 station. The sun lifted up over the tops of the purplish ridges, burning up the coolness of night. It was a dry, searing heat, reflecting on the dried up salt marshes, making them glitter like fields of snow.

Grady saw the two big borax wagons drawn across the road at the station where he'd seen the mule poisoned the day before. Armed men moved around the place, and some of them were sitting up on top of the high wagons, guns across their laps.

Ames said, "They'll have a hell of a time breaking through this block, Carr. They don't have any cover whatever coming up to it."

Grady dismounted and walked around the barricade. There was no way to get around the wagons. On either side of the graded road was soft white sand through which forty teams of mules couldn't pull a borax wagon.

Jeffrey Ames took a drink of water from the water tank and then came over to where Grady was sitting on the wagon tongue.

"Lace Rantner will be too damned smart to run into this barricade head on. He'll take his men out of the wagons and bring them up on our flanks. Then he'll try to drive us away from the station."

Grady nodded. "I thought of that," he said, wondering what was coming next.

"Figured we'd take a look back there," Ames went on. "Rantner won't be along for another hour or so. There's a little coulee a half mile or so down the road. Maybe we could plant a dozen men on either side of the road and hit them before they even reach us."

"It's an idea," Grady admitted. "You want to take a look at that coulee?"

"We can ride out and get back before Rantner's wagons come in sight," Ames told him. "If you think it's worth while we'll deploy our men there."

"We'll look at it," Grady said.

AMES was riding a big dapple gray animal. He took the lead as they trotted back up the road, and then he cut off the road and crossed a dried salt marsh, disappearing among big boulders here.

Grady followed him, his face expressionless. It was hot here now with the full blast of the sun beginning to hit them. Ames swung in around the rocks and let the gray horse pick its own way down into a narrow coulee which ran at right angles to the road. The ravine was an ancient wash—the course of some dried up river bed in ages past.

The two horses had to move carefully over the uneven ground at the bottom. Ames glanced back once as the ravine started to widen. They were down below the level of the surrounding land now, and the heat was even worse here.

The wash widened until it was a dozen or so yards across and ten or fifteen feet deep. Ames turned around and grinned. He said,

"This coulee cuts right across the road. We had to fill it in when we built the road through here. We could put a whole regiment down here and Rantner wouldn't see a man until he came right up to us."

Grady was thinking that Rantner would be a damned fool if he didn't send riders up ahead of his wagons. He didn't say that. He said, "Where does the road come in here?"

"Fifty yards straight ahead," Ames told him. He'd stopped the gray horse and he was lighting a cigarette now as he sat a dozen feet ahead of Grady. He seemed in no particular hurry.

Grady watched him, and the feeling started to take possession of him that this was it—the thing he'd been waiting for. He let his right hand slide down near the butt of his six-gun and he leaned forward in the saddle.

Jeffrey Ames was watching him as he lighted the cigarette and threw away the match. The white-haired man started to smile, and it was not a pleasant smile.

He said softly,

"That gun won't help you now, Carr."

Grady smiled back at him. He was positive now that he'd ridden into a trap; he'd thought of that since starting out on this

fool's errand, but he wanted to see it through.

"You talk in riddles, Ames."

"No," the silken-haired man grinned, "I talk with guns, Carr—loaded guns."

Grady heard the pebble roll down the side of the coulee wall to his left and a little behind him. He glanced that way without haste and he looked into the evil face of the squat little man with the walrus-mustache, the man he'd fired from the No. 10 camp the day before. This was Horne, the former Carr Borax station man. He had a Winchester rifle balanced on a ledge of black rock at the top of the coulee, and the muzzle of the gun was lined up with Grady's back.

Horne said, "Maybe you'd like another drink o' water, Carr."

Grady turned his head toward the other wall of the coulee, and he looked into the green eyes of Seeley, the second attendant, his bullet shaped head bent over another Winchester as he looked down the sights from a position less than ten yards from Grady.

Grady said quietly, "Your boys, Ames?"

"That's right," Ames nodded. "You fired them, but they always worked for me."

"Even poisoning your own mules," Grady said thoughtfully, "to make me think Lace Rantner was behind it."

Ames chuckled. "And now this whole damned town knows you and Rantner are on the warpath," he stated. "When they find you dead, it's Rantner who did it, and I swear I saw him shoot you down in this coulee."

"So you bring in the law," Grady said, "and you get Rantner and you get young Halliday on murder charges. That leaves you alone in the Valley—king of hell. Who rode Halliday's horse last night when I was nearly cut down? Was it Horne or Seeley?"

"Horne," Ames smiled. "His aim was bad. I trust it will be better this morning."

GRADY nodded. He was stalling for time now, but there wasn't much left. With two Winchesters trained on his back

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he had little chance to go for his gun. There was the slim possibility he'd get Ames before the bullets from the Winchester cut him down. That was some consolation.

"Ames," he said, "you're slipping up on one point. You'll never be able to prove that Rantner and Halliday had me killed. They'll have witnesses to prove that they were with their wagons this morning."

"I don't have to prove it," Ames told him. "Because of the peculiar circumstances of your death, I can close this road to every competitor in the field. I can hire a hundred toughs to do it for me, and Rantner and Halliday will die on the branch."

Horne said sourly, "Hell, Ames, let's stop the damned talk."

Jeffrey Ames glanced up toward the man, and Grady realized that that was the sign. He'd been trying to decide which man of the two above him was the most dangerous, and Horne's remark made up his mind. Horne was anxious to get it over with, and therefore Horne might miss. Horne had missed the night before.

Seeley, the tall man with the broken nose, was saying nothing. He was ready to shoot, and Grady's first bullet, if he was able to get the gun from the holster, had to be directed at him.

Digging his spurs into the chestnut's flanks, Grady's right hand tore at the gun in the holster. The horse snorted and leaped as the sharp spurs cut into its flesh.

A rifle cracked, and then another, almost blending with the first report. A rifle ball cut the flesh of Grady's left arm above the elbow. He saw Ames, face distorted, yanking at his own gun, and then he sent his first slug in the direction of Seeley up on the coulee wall. Even as he shot he saw Horne tumbling from the wall, falling head first.

His slug, fired in haste, with the chestnut dancing nervously, hit Seeley in the shoulder as he was trying to bring his Winchester into position for another shot.

The man rolled over on his side, tried to sit up, and then a bullet struck him in the head. There was a sickening spat. Seeley slumped on the rock, his hat falling



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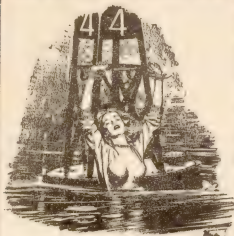


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from his head, revealing his almost bald pate.

The shot had come from a position beyond Jeffrey Ames, and then Grady heard Lace Rantner's bull-like roar.

"There's another one," Rantner called. "Watch him!"

Grady was watching him. Ames had his gun out, but his gray horse, excited by the shooting, was moving nervously. The white-haired man cursed as he tried to line his gun on Grady, and then he suddenly drove his horse straight toward Grady, with the intention of shooting him down and riding to safety.

His six-gun banged at a distance of less than ten feet. Grady was trying to steady his own aim when the slug from Ames' gun ripped through his shirt, under the right armpit. He fired twice as the gray horse hurtled past him, and then he turned to watch Ames fall from the saddle.

There was no life in the white-haired man's body as it hit the soft sand of the coulee bottom. Grady Carr knew he was dead even before he fell.

HE was stepping from the saddle when Rantner, Tom Halliday, and two other riders rode around the boulders on the floor of the coulee and came toward him. They'd been concealed in the coulee just around the bend near the spot where Ames had stopped.

The big man rode over to where Ames had fallen, and looked down at the man. He said quietly, "I heard the whole damned business, Carr. He nearly had you set up."

"He was trying to get us all set up," Grady said grimly. "I want you to know, Rantner, I wasn't going through with this fight. It was a bluff from the beginning. I knew you weren't the kind of man who poisoned mules."

Tom Halliday said curiously, "You mean you suspected Ames all the time?"

Grady shrugged. "I had no proof of anything," he stated. "I was waiting for Ames to tip his hand." He added ruefully, "He never did right to the end."

"It was some of Ames' toughs who wrecked my outfit last night," Halliday said. "He was trying to swing me against

you, too, so that he'd have the both of us on the same hook when he had you killed, Carr."

Grady nodded. "He would have gotten away with it if you boys hadn't come into the coulee at the wrong time."

"We were ridin' up ahead of our wagons," Rantner explained. "Just before we came out into the open a half mile back on the road, we saw you and Ames ride down into the coulee. We came up and entered it from the other side. We were waitin' when Ames pulled up an' started his talk."

They could hear the rumble of wagon wheels in the distance now, and Halliday said wryly, "Reckon we'll call off our little war now, Carr. You'd better ride back to Mojave and have that arm attended to."

Grady glanced down at the arm. Blood had drenched his sleeve, but he'd scarcely been aware of it.

"I'll send word first to have that block taken down," he said. "You can start running your wagons through now."

Rantner grinned and said, "There's peace in Death Valley, boys."

Tom Halliday looked down at his hands. He said, "You mind stopping in and seeing my sister, Carr? She's kind of worried about this business. I'm going on up to my plant in the Valley."

Grady glanced at him quickly. He saw the little grin on young Halliday's face and he started to redden.

Halliday said, "Heard you two had a little dispute in my backyard last night, Carr. I'm sure you'll want to get that straightened out, too."

"I should do that," Grady admitted.

"I have an idea," Halliday added, "that she'll be kind of glad to see you, Carr. Good luck."

Grady looked at him. "I've had plenty already," he murmured, "but a little more along that line won't hurt."

He rode off through the haze of heat and he didn't feel it. He felt almost cool, comfortable, very happy.

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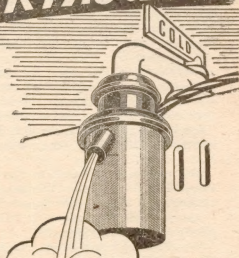
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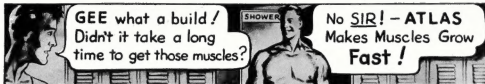
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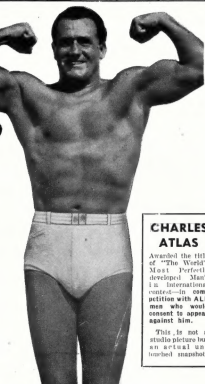
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